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Anne McAllister

THE INCONVENIENT BRIDE



“Why fight it? It’s what we *both* want. Unless you only believe in one-night stands?”

“Of course not!”

“Then maybe you’re a chicken.”

Her eyes flashed. “I’m never a chicken!”

“No?” Dominic challenged softly. “Then prove it.”

For a long moment she didn’t move. Then something changed. The corners of her mouth turned up in a smile that set his heart pounding. And quite deliberately Sierra reached out and snagged his tie from where he’d tossed it on the chair.

She ran it through her fingers as she stepped forward to meet him. And his heart slammed against his chest as she whispered, “How nice of you to remember I had a use for this.”

ANNE McALLISTER was born in California. She spent long lazy summers daydreaming on local beaches and studying surfers, swimmers and volleyball players in an effort to find the perfect hero. She finally did—not on the beach, but in the university library where she was working. She, her husband and their four children have since moved to the Midwest. She taught, copyedited, capped deodorant bottles and ghostwrote sermons before turning to her first love, writing romance fiction.

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Anne McAllister

THE INCONVENIENT BRIDE



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wise, patient and encouraging—especially when it wasn't even her book!
For Jack and Judy, Happy 30th!

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CHAPTER ONE

“Y_{OUR} father on line one.”

They were the words Dominic Wolfe least wanted to hear.

He sighed and shut his eyes. It had already been a hellish morning.

He liked a brisk walk to his office. The mile trek downtown from his Fifth Avenue apartment was ordinarily exactly what he needed to compose his thoughts, run over his mental list of to-do's and psyche himself up to tackle the day.

Today he'd got drenched halfway there. The “early morning shower” predicted by the weather service had become an eight a.m. cloudburst instead. And by the time Dominic had decided it was more than a sprinkle, taxis had become nonexistent.

He'd arrived, damp and annoyed, to a message that the president of the company with whom he was negotiating a buyout had chosen this moment to rethink his options. While he was trying to sort that out, a supplier in Japan sent a fax saying the shipment would be delayed. His secretary, Shyla, was morning sick, pale and wan and gasping, although trying to mask it with ruthless efficiency.

And Marjorie—the woman he'd been quite sure would never want more from him than his presence in her bed—had just banged the receiver in his ear after delivering an ultimatum: if he wanted to see the inside of her bedroom again, she expected an engagement ring.

And now the old man was on line one?

Dominic did *not* want to talk to the old man.

“Did you hear me, Dominic?” His secretary, Shyla, interpreted his silence for distraction, not reluctance. “He said it was urgent.”

It was always urgent now that his father was no longer running things.

Douglas Wolfe had far too much time on his hands since he'd retired. He'd gone merrily off to Florida eighteen months ago, telling Dominic he intended to catch up on his reading, fishing and all the other things his years at the top of corporate America had never permitted him to do.

Shuffleboard, Dominic had thought. He'd expected his father to fish and read, to play games and eat Egg McMuffins with his friends.

Instead the old man had spent his every waking moment researching new strategies for the company he was no longer running and attempting to assure its future. That meant he was determined to find the woman who would tempt Dominic to leave bachelorhood behind.

It wasn't going to happen.

Dominic had told him that. They'd been over it a hundred times. More.

Douglas had tried his hand at matchmaking once before. He'd found Dominic a fiancée a dozen years ago. Carin had been absolutely perfect. Young, sweet, gorgeous, and the daughter of one of Wolfe Enterprises' biggest suppliers. Dominic had been young, handsome, ambitious, and naive. He'd thought marriages like that worked out.

He'd never expected Carin to jilt him.

But she had. He'd been left standing at their Bahamas hideaway with a ring, a red face and two hundred intrigued wedding guests, but no bride.

He sure as hell wasn't letting the old man have another shot.

For a dozen years, Douglas had lain low, had let Dominic revel in easy bachelordom. But retirement had apparently pricked his need to meddle again. For the past eighteen months, he'd showed up with a woman every month for Dominic to "look over."

Dominic had assumed it was biological—some sort of urge to become a grandfather that hit men when they turned sixty-five. Thus he'd expected the old man to let up when his youngest brother Rhys had, just this past Christmas, inadvertently provided their father with twins.

But it hadn't mattered. It was May now, and in the past five months Douglas had appeared with one woman after another—each as precise and tailored and businesslike as Dominic himself.

They wouldn't have sex, they'd have mergers, he'd told the old man after the last one. There was no way on earth he would ever consider someone like that!

"Well, what do you want?" Douglas had sputtered.

"To be left alone," Dominic growled and banged down the phone.

He had been for the past three weeks. He'd hoped his father had got the message at last. Now the old man was on line one.

Dominic punched the button and barked into the phone. "What?"

"And a lovely fine morning to you, too," his father's cheerful voice boomed in his ear.

“Not lovely here. It’s raining like hell.” Dominic scowled out the floor-to-ceiling windows of his office onto the gray damp dismal world beyond.

“I’ll tell Evelyn to pack my umbrella and rubber boots.”

“Pack—? Why?” Dominic sat up straight, his fingers strangling his Mont Blanc pen.

His earlier vague sense of foreboding was presently slamming him right between the eyes. Why should his father’s housekeeper be packing Douglas’s umbrella and rubber boots, unless—

“I’m having dinner with Tommy Hargrove this evening. Been talking to him about maybe coming on board. So Viveca and I are catching the noon flight to New York and—”

“Whoa. Stop. Tommy Hargrove is not coming on board.”

If they’d been through this once, they’d been through it a thousand times. Tommy Hargrove’s small company might once have been a possible acquisition. It was no longer. “Wolfe Enterprises isn’t in the market for a small outdated communications firm. And who the hell is Viveca?”

“Tommy and I are old friends.” Douglas ignored the last question, going on smoothly, “We go back a long way, since before you were in diapers, young man.”

Whenever Dominic became “young man” it meant Douglas was meddling again.

“And,” his father went on, “it is not a foregone conclusion that Tommy’s company isn’t just what we need.”

“Yes,” Dominic said, his voice pure steel. “It is.”

“We’ll see,” Douglas said enigmatically.

“We won’t—”

“It is possible,” Douglas went on as if Dominic hadn’t begun to speak, “that I could agree with you. If you and Viveca...”

Dominic slammed his pen down on the solid teak desk.

“Haven’t I spoken of Viveca?” Douglas was all mild innocence.

“No,” Dominic said through his teeth.

“Ah. Well, she’s why I called actually,” Douglas said with determined good cheer. “Lovely girl. Stunning, really. Pauline Moore’s daughter. You remember Pauline. Miss America pageant. Mensa. Phi Beta Kappa. Ran into Pauline and her daughter at the club on Monday. Pauline introduced us. Wondered if I didn’t have a son about her age. Of course she meant Rhys. Viveca’s much younger than you. Gorgeous girl. Long blond hair. Brilliant.

Witty. Charming. Did I tell you she's getting a Ph.D. in art history. She—" Douglas was gearing up for a long discussion of Viveca Moore's best qualities.

"Cut to the chase," Dominic said wearily.

"Marry her," Douglas said flatly.

"*What!*"

"You heard me. Get married. To her. You need to get married. To have children. To carry on the line. Marry Viveca," Douglas said, "and I'll tell Tommy we've taken another direction."

"I'll tell Tommy we've taken another direction and I won't have to marry her."

There was a second's silence. "Then I'll tell the board I don't support you."

It was as if all of Manhattan had ground to a halt. For one long moment there wasn't a sound, beyond the pounding of his own blood in Dominic's ears.

And then he said with a calmness he didn't begin to feel, "Is that a threat?"

"Of course it's not a threat," Douglas blustered. "It's a damn promise, boy. You're not getting any younger. You're thirty-six years old! You should have got over that nonsense with Carol—"

"Carin."

"Carol, Carin—whatever her name was—years ago! It's like riding a horse, lad! If you fall off you don't run away and lick your wounds, you damned well get back on again."

"Marry the next woman down the pike, you mean?" Dominic was amazed his voice sounded so mild. He felt like the top of his head was about to come off.

"Of course not. Not just any woman! But there's plenty of damn fine gals around. You've had a dozen years to find one and you haven't done it!"

"Maybe I don't want to."

"Nonsense!" Douglas didn't even consider that. "You need to. For the business if not for yourself. People trust a married man. He seems responsible, reliable. They've given you the benefit of the doubt for years. But you're walking the edge now. Besides," Douglas changed his tack, "you've got the makings of a fine family man. A fine father."

“Like you?” Dominic’s voice was scathing, but his father didn’t even notice.

“Chip off the old block,” Douglas agreed without missing a beat. “That’s why I know you’ll like Viveca.”

“I don’t want—”

“You don’t know what you want anymore! I bring you a redhead, you want a blonde. I bring you a homemaker, you want a Ph.D. I bring you a—”

“I want you to stop bringing me women!”

“I will.”

“When?”

“After tonight. After you meet Viveca. You won’t want another woman after Viveca! She’s everything you want. A blonde. A homemaker *with* a Ph.D.! And—”

“And if I don’t marry her you’re going to go to the board with a vote of no confidence,” Dominic said through his teeth.

There was a split second’s hesitation. Then Douglas said, “You’re damn right.”

Dominic understood that split second. It was the point-of-no-return. It was the jumping off spot. The last chance to turn back.

Douglas hadn’t turned back.

“Viveca and I will be in the city this evening,” he said firmly. “Join us—and Tommy—for dinner at Le Sabre’s. At eight.”

“I’ve got—”

“At eight, Dominic.”

The phone crashed down in his ear.

Dominic stared at it. Then he set it slowly back in its cradle. He tilted back in his chair and shoved it round so that he sat staring at the rain coursing down his window on the world. He drummed his fingers lightly on the arms of his chair and considered his options.

He supposed idly that he should have spiked his father’s guns before now. He should have put his foot down years ago, should have said, “Back off,” both in terms of the company and in terms of his life.

He hadn’t because he’d spent his life admiring his father. He’d admired the old man’s determination, his tenacity, his fierce, indomitable will. He’d grown up wanting to be just like him.

He’d dug in and endured the “from the ground up” apprenticeship that his father had deemed necessary for taking over the business. He’d got his

hands dirty. He'd worked days and nights, holidays and weekends. He'd done everything that was ever asked of him—and he'd done it well.

A dozen years ago he'd even let the old man pick his bride because he understood why his father wanted ties between his company and Carin's family's. It had been good business sense, and he'd liked Carin—what he knew of her. He'd been sure he would have made a good husband.

It was Carin who had run. Not him.

And when she had, leaving him hurt and humiliated beyond belief, still Dominic had believed in the theory behind his father's actions.

Even now—God help him—he believed Douglas was right. In business married men did seem more trustworthy. More predictable. Less like loners or loose cannons. Some of the CEOs in other corporations he'd done business with recently had implied as much. They'd suggested that he bring his wife to various functions and had lifted a brow just a little when he'd said he didn't have one.

He imagined his father was right, too, that this Viveca, whoever she was, would be the consummate corporate wife. Blonde. Brilliant. Bloodless. Charming. Capable. Clever. The perfect accessory for a CEO to wear on his arm.

Dominic shut his eyes for a minute and saw the future. Saw himself and the bloodless blonde his father had chosen for him.

He opened his eyes and stared out the window at the streaming rain.

It was warm inside, cold out there. The windows were fogging up, reminding him of other foggy windows, of a night out of time—of steam and sex and a woman who wasn't bloodless at all.

And he felt his body harden now at the mere memory of her—and of that night.

For the past three months he'd been doing his damndest to forget.

He'd been trying since February to pretend it never happened. Then, because he couldn't manage that, he'd tried to convince himself that it would never happen again.

He didn't believe it ever could.

Sex like they'd had that night was a once in a lifetime thing. It had to be. He'd certainly never had it before—or since.

It certainly hadn't happened with Marjorie.

What if—

He tried not to pursue that thought. He couldn't help himself.

What if it hadn't been a fluke? What if they could do it again? And again?

His mouth went dry. His palms got damp. A very unprofessional, unbusinesslike reaction was taking place in his fine worsted charcoal wool trousers. He tugged at his grey-and-burgundy striped tie. It was the same tie...the one she had...

He sucked air.

Then he shoved himself out of his chair, stalked across the room and flung open the door to the outer office.

Shyla held out the phone to him. "Dominic, Mr. Shiguru on line two and Ms. Beecher has been on hold—"

"Not now." He didn't even break stride as he grabbed his raincoat and headed for the door.

"Dominic! Where are you going?"

"To get a wife."

Sierra should have known it was going to be one of those days.

The moment she opened her eyes to see the rain pounding down the tulips in the window box on her fire escape, she should have closed them again and pulled the covers over her head.

Instead she'd pasted on one of her eternal-optimist smiles and told herself how good the rain was for the flowers. She refused to think how bad it was for hair.

Her mistake.

Of course it was bad for hair. It was also bad for tempers and taxis and terminally temperamental clients with the artistic vision of brain-dead walruses, not to mention for photographers whose babies had been teething all night and models with naturally curly locks.

No, it was not a good day.

Sierra did not expect every day to be stress-free. But the bitch-quotient in Finn MacCauley's studio this morning was threatening to blow Manhattan right off the map.

"Hurry up," Finn was saying for the fiftieth time that hour. "Move it! Move it! Move it! Do you know how many damn dresses we've still got left to shoot?"

Sierra didn't know. She didn't care.

The dresses weren't her problem. Her problem was the hair.
Sleek hair. Piled hair. Severe shellacked hair.

"She's frizzing again!" Ballou, the temperamental client pointed at Alison, the goddess from the Bronx. "Look at her!" He grabbed fistfuls of Alison's long wildly curling hair straight out from her head and yelled at Sierra, "She can't frizz! She has to be sleek! Make her sleek!"

It would be easier to make a porcupine bald. Sierra sighed. "Hang on. Let me put on some more gel. Just a little gel."

"Sierra, for Pete's sake!" Finn was tearing his own hair. "Let's go. Stop messing with her and get the hell out of the way."

"I just need—"

"Sleek," Ballou insisted. "Smooth. Straight as a die." He made up and down knifing motions with his hands.

Then why did you ask for a model with naturally curly hair? Sierra wanted to scream.

"I'm frizzing, too!" Delilah, the other model, complained.

"And not the blue. I don't like her in the blue," Ballou decided, scrutinizing the dress Alison had just put on. "Let's try the yellow."

"I can't wear yellow!" the model objected. "I look dead in yellow."

"You're going to *be* dead in yellow," Finn said, "if you don't shut up. We have thirty of these damn things to get finished and we've only done six! Sierra! Let's go!"

They went. The models stood patiently while Sierra slicked them down again. Ballou fussed and fumed and fretted and changed his mind and Finn griped and growled and cussed and shot.

And all the while Sierra tried to stay up-beat because after all, she told herself, in the greater course of the universe what difference did it make?

It was rain. A yellow dress or a blue one. Curly hair. Frizzy hair. Straight hair. What difference did it make?

It didn't.

Not like Frankie.

That was really what made it a lousy day—thinking about Frankie.

Frankie Bartelli was going to die.

Sierra hated to even think that. Her mind rebelled at the thought. Her emotions rejected it furiously. But for all her rebellion and all her rejection, it was going to happen—unless he got a kidney transplant—and soon.

Sure, some people lived a long time with kidney problems. Some people did just fine on dialysis for years and years.

But they weren't Frankie, who for the last few months had been fading right before Sierra's eyes.

They weren't eight years old, either, with their whole lives ahead of them.

They didn't dream about climbing mountains and going fishing and playing baseball. They didn't draw the niftiest spaceships or the scariest green monsters or detailed plans for the "best tree house in the world."

They didn't love *Star Trek* and root beer floats and double cheese pizza. They didn't have big brown eyes and sooty dark lashes and a cowlick that even Sierra's most determined hair gel couldn't subdue for long. They didn't have the world's croakiest laugh and a grin that melted you where you stood.

Or maybe they did.

Sierra didn't know. She didn't know about anyone—except Frankie.

He and his mother Pam had been Sierra's neighbors since she'd moved into half of the third floor of a four-story walk-up in the Village three years ago.

Frankie had been a lot healthier-looking then. A lot stronger. And Pam hadn't had that hunted, haunted look in her dark brown eyes.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she'd said, her voice cracking when she'd first told Sierra what the doctors had told her.

To Sierra it was simple. "If he needs a transplant, we'll get him a transplant," she had vowed.

But Pam, desperate but realistic, had shaken her head in despair. "The hospital wants two hundred, fifty thousand dollars up front before they'll even agree to put him on the list."

It seemed like highway robbery to Sierra. Extortion. Every vile thing she could think of. Just because Pam was a self-employed illustrator whose insurance coverage had managed to fall through some crack, that was no reason for them to deny Frankie.

And she said so hotly and furiously more than once.

But they had denied him. Just this morning Pam had repeated it. "They won't even see him unless I come up with a quarter of a million dollars."

Sierra had almost twenty thousand in savings. Sometimes it seemed like a lot. But compared to what Frankie needed, it was a pittance. Even if she

begged on the streets she didn't think she could come up with as much as Pam needed. But she wasn't ready to admit defeat.

"I'll think of something," she'd vowed and squeezed Pammie's hands. "Don't worry."

But if she had told Pammie not to, Sierra worried herself. All morning long, she'd worried. But she hadn't come up with any ideas at all.

"Okay. Let's go. Long necks, ladies. Lots of chin. Gimme lots of chin." Finn started moving again, shooting as he did so. "Don't block each other, for God's sake. Move, Alison."

Alison moved—right into one of the reflectors. It fell over with a crash.

Ballou dropped the half dozen dresses in his arms. "Oh, no! Ohmigod!" He scrabbled for them. "They'll get creased! Sierra, help!"

"Damn!" Finn's face turned red. "Sierra, get the reflector."

"I'm frizzing again," Alison wailed. "Sierra! Do something!"

And just when Sierra thought the day couldn't possibly get any worse, the studio door banged open and in strode Dominic Wolfe.

Strong, Finn's lady-marine-drill-sergeant office manager came hurrying, hard on his heels. "Excuse me, sir! *Sir!* You can't go in there!"

But Strong didn't know Dominic Wolfe.

"The Hotshot With The Cool Head," the *Times* business pages had headlined him just last week in an in-depth profile of the hard-driving, hard-working CEO of Wolfe Enterprises that they'd called "an old-fashioned business with a new-fashioned future."

What they meant was that under his guidance, Wolfe Enterprises, a communications company had moved from radio and television right into the newest electronic and digital media without a glitch.

"Because Dominic Wolfe knows what he wants," the article had said. "And what Dominic wants, Dominic gets."

And that, Sierra could have told them, was the honest-to-God truth.

Strong might have been no more than an angry mosquito as she buzzed after him.

Sierra watched in morbid astonished fascination, aware that her heart was kicking over in her chest. She hadn't seen Dominic Wolfe since her sister Mariah married his brother Rhys three months ago.

She had very carefully *not* seen him since that time—just as he had very carefully *not* seen her.

She had done her damndest to forget him.

And she'd certainly never expected him to turn up in the middle of Finn MacCauley's studio, heading straight toward her.

But before he reached her, Finn stepped between them. "Wolfe?" He looked perplexed, obviously wondering what his friend Rhys's high-powered CEO brother was doing here.

They all wondered—the annoyed Strong, the slack-jawed Ballou, the starry-eyed models, the makeup artist—and Sierra.

Especially Sierra.

Since he'd pushed his way through the door, he hadn't taken his eyes off her. And whatever amazing electricity had begun sizzling between them the first time they'd met when she'd stormed into his office last summer, demanding the whereabouts of his brother, was still sizzling all these months later—even though they denied it, assuaged it, tried to ignore it.

Now she stepped round Finn and looked up into Dominic's ice-chip eyes. "What do you want?"

"I want you to marry me," Dominic said.

He didn't care that she looked poleaxed or that Finn looked murderous or that everyone else seemed to think he'd just escaped from bedlam.

He repeated the words. "Marry me," in case she wanted to pretend she hadn't heard them.

"Marry...you?"

It was the first time he'd seen Sierra Kelly slack-jawed. But at least she'd finally found her voice. And privately Dominic was satisfied that he'd actually succeeded in shocking her.

"That's what I said." He grinned now, daring her.

And, because she was Sierra, she tipped her sock-it-to-me chin right straight at him and dared him right back. "You'd have to pay me a million bucks!"

"Half a million."

"What!" She went beyond slack-jawed, straight to flabbergasted. "Be serious."

"I am serious." He grabbed her arm and dragged her out into the reception area where half a dozen pairs of prying eyes couldn't oversee and an equal number of ears couldn't overhear. "You want a half a million bucks, fine."

“But—” she started to protest, then looked at him narrowly, suspiciously. “Why?”

“Because.”

She laughed. “Because? Oh, there’s a reason. This from the man the *Times* calls ‘focused, decisive, a man who knows his own mind.’”

Dominic snorted. “One reporter’s impression.”

“Backed up by pretty solid evidence,” Sierra said. “So, I repeat, why do you want to marry me?”

He rubbed a hand over his hair, still damp from the rain and admitted, “I don’t.”

Sierra’s hazel eyes flashed. She folded her arms across her Day-Glo orange rib-topped chest, but not before he’d noted the faintest outline of her nipples. He felt a stirring in his groin.

“Well, then?” Sierra eyed him narrowly. She tapped the toe of her boot.

Dominic gritted his teeth. “I need to get married.”

“I thought only women needed to get married.”

Damn her smart mouth! He could feel heat climbing up his neck. “It’s time I got married. CEOs look more responsible when they’re married.”

“You’re marrying *me* to look responsible?”

“I’m marrying to shut my old man up! I want him to get the hell out of my life! I want *him* to stop trying to find me a wife. I want him to get his claws out of me and out of the company and stay the hell down in Florida playing shuffleboard where he belongs!”

“Like you would be content to play shuffleboard.”

Dominic blinked. “What?”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t want to spend your life playing shuffleboard. And you’re just like him.”

“The hell I—well, so what if I am!” Dominic scowled and kneaded the taut muscles at the back of his neck. Then he found his rationale. “He’d do the same damn thing I’m doing then. He’d do things his own way.”

“He’d marry me?” Sierra said skeptically. “He’d marry a woman with magenta hair?”

“It’s not magenta,” Dominic muttered, giving her tousled locks a quick assessing glance. “It’s purple.”

Actually it was more of a magenta, now that she mentioned it. A very vivid magenta and not easily ignored, unless you looked the other way,

which was what he tried to do. But his eyes kept coming back to it with a certain morbid fascination.

But morbid fascination, to be honest, was a good part of Sierra's appeal. Maybe not the only part, but it would serve the old man right when Dominic introduced Sierra as his wife. He could see what he'd driven his eldest son to!

"Purple, magenta," Sierra brushed his quibble off. She was still looking at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I'm thinking maybe green next week. I did it green for St. Patrick's," she told him with a grin.

She was baiting him and he knew it. "So, what do you say?" he persisted.

"I think you're insane."

"Probably." He waited.

"You're actually serious?"

"I'm serious."

Still she hesitated. She nibbled on her lower lip. Dominic remembered nibbling on that lip. He remembered the taste of her—hadn't been able to forget the taste of her! He smothered a groan.

"Sierra?" he said impatiently.

"Half a million?"

It was the last thing he'd figured she would say. Sierra Kelly—the nearest thing to a free spirit he knew—was not a money-grubber. At least he hadn't imagined that she was. He frowned at her, but she didn't back down. And he had gone too far to back down now himself.

Besides, a half a million to get the old man off his back permanently was a bargain.

He shrugged irritably. "Half a million."

"Now? You'll give it to me now?"

"You want to stop at a bank on the way to the courthouse?" He was halfway between sarcasm and disbelief.

But Sierra nodded gravely. "Yes. Please."

He stared at her, wondering what went on inside her magenta-colored head. But he was annoyed enough, and reckless enough at the moment, not to care. "It's a deal," he said. "For half a million bucks you'll marry me this afternoon."

Sierra only hesitated a second. "Yes."

Any minute now, Sierra figured, she'd wake up.

She'd yawn and stretch and open her eyes to stare at the cracked ceiling above her narrow futon bed. And she would laugh at the craziness of her dreams.

Marry Dominic Wolfe?

Sierra had had some weird dreams in her lifetime, but never one as weird as that. She blinked as she spritzed Alison's hair. She rolled her shoulders and shook her head, trying to wake up. Surely it was time for the alarm to ring!

"What's the matter with you?" Dominic demanded.

The matter was that she was awake.

He lifted his arm and shot back his cuff to glance at his watch. "We need to get moving."

"Can't," Sierra said. "Not yet. I have work to do. A job. A commitment," she explained when she realized that he wouldn't think her job was worth bothering about. He understood commitments at least.

His jaw tightened, and she thought he would object. But finally he nodded. "Then do it. Let's get this show on the road."

And as Sierra stood there, mouth ajar, he pitched in and got things going.

No, that didn't describe it. He didn't pitch in. He commandeered. He took one look around and decided what needed to be done.

"You," he said to Alison, "Stop sniveling and get dressed. You, too," he said to Delilah. "And get your fingers out of your hair."

To a stupefied Ballou, he said, "Stop standing around like a moron. Get those dresses out and ready. Shake them out. Have the next one ready as soon as Finn finishes."

To Finn he said, "We need to be done by two. And we'll need witnesses. Sierra and I are getting married. Have her—" he jerked his head toward Strong "—call Izzy."

Finn stared, poleaxed, first at Dominic, then at Sierra. "You're going to marry him?" He sounded as disbelieving as Sierra felt.

But there were some things Finn didn't know about. Like the chemistry that had been bubbling between her and Dominic for months. Like the night after Mariah and Rhys's wedding. Like the most sizzling sex she'd ever experienced. Like the fact that she hadn't been able to forget the man she'd

shared it with even though she knew she should, even though she'd tried. Like Frankie.

Especially Frankie.

"I'm going to marry him, yes." She nodded her head.

If Finn considered arguing, a long look into her eyes apparently made him decide not to. "Right," he said. "Two it is."

"We can't," Ballou protested.

"No way," cried the models.

At five of two they were done.

"Let's go." Dominic was tapping his foot as she packed up the tackle box in which she carried her gear. Then she grabbed her jacket, stuffed her arms in it, and picked up the tackle box, hugging it against her chest.

"Where are you going with that?" Dominic demanded.

"It goes where I go," Sierra said stubbornly. She looked down at his briefcase. "Like yours."

He sighed mightily. "Fine. Come on."

"What about a license?" she asked as he spirited her down the elevator.

"We'll get one."

"What about a waiting period?" She was sure there must be one.

"Normally twenty-four hours," Dominic said. "I can get us an exception." He was dragging her out the door, through the rain, and into the hired car waiting at the curb.

"This is insane, you know that, don't you?" she muttered, scrambling in ahead of him. The windows were steamed. She remembered other windows...

"Yes." Dominic climbed in beside her. He was so close she could feel the heat from his body, remembered how very hot that body could be...

"You'll regret it tomorrow," she said with an edge of desperation to her voice.

"Very likely." He banged the door shut behind him.

"I'll regret it tomorrow." She clutched the tackle box like it was a life preserver in a storm-swept sea.

"Without a doubt." Then he turned to face her squarely, and she saw a wild, reckless look in Dominic Wolfe's normally cool blue eyes. Hot ice. That was what it made her think of. It was a look Sierra remembered seeing only once before—on the wildest, craziest night of her life.

"So you have to decide—are you in or not?"

For three months she'd tried to forget that night. She hadn't forgotten. From the glitter in his eyes, she knew Dominic hadn't, either.

Marrying Dominic *was* insane.

She *would* regret it. So would he.

They had nothing but sex between them. Primal attraction. Animal hunger. Lust. A four-letter word that started with L, but hardly the right one on which to base a marriage. But what was the use of being a gambler if you never threw the dice.

They went to the bank.

He got her a check. Made them print it out, spelled out her name.

"Sierra Kelly Wolfe," he said, "because you will be when you cash it." And he thrust it into her hand.

He didn't ask what she was going to do with it. He didn't seem to even care. "Satisfied?" he asked as she stared at it, counting the zeroes.

Sierra, trying not to gape, nodded dumbly. "Yes."

"Good." He steered her out of the bank and bundled her back into the car. "City hall," he told the driver.

Sierra hadn't been to city hall since she'd applied for her cosmetology license. She was amazed to find they got their marriage license in the same room. She didn't mention this amazing bit of news to Dominic. He wasn't listening.

He was arranging their wedding.

He gave the clerk information. Then it was her turn. She gave the answers by rote, filled in the forms, signed where she was told. If she'd doubted his ability to arrange an exception to the waiting period, she didn't doubt for long.

He called a friend, who called a friend. In a matter of minutes it was arranged that someone called Judge Willis would perform the ceremony in his chambers.

"Almost there," Dominic said, and taking her arm once more, he hauled her toward the door. "I'll call Finn. Tell him and Izzy where to meet us."

"You don't want to call Rhys?"

Dominic had been best man at Rhys and Mariah's wedding. Sierra had been Mariah's maid of honor.

In the act of opening the door, Dominic stopped and arched a brow. “Do you want to call Mariah?”

Never in a million years! Mariah was sane and sensible. She would throw herself in front of a speeding train before she would let Sierra do something as stupid as marry her brother-in-law on the spur of the moment.

“Didn’t think so.” Dominic pulled out a cell phone, checked his organizer, and punched in Finn’s number. “Finn? All set,” he said without preamble. “Meet us in Judge Willis’s chambers at five.”

He rattled off the directions, then grabbed Sierra’s arm again. “It’s not in this building. Let’s go.”

It was two streets over, five flights up, down two long corridors. Dominic’s legs were a lot longer than hers, and Sierra was panting by the time they arrived. Finn and Izzy and all four of their kids arrived moments later.

“What the—?” Dominic looked aghast at the sight of nine-year-old twins, Pansy and Tansy, three-year-old Rip and baby Crash. He turned his gaze on Finn’s wife, Izzy, his look both accusing and appalled.

Izzy didn’t give him a chance to object. She poked her umbrella at him. “You want me to get a baby-sitter, you have to give me more than ten minutes’ notice.”

Then she turned her eyes toward Sierra. “Are you crazy?” she demanded. To be marrying Dominic, she meant.

It was a question anyone knowing them would ask, and Sierra knew it. She shrugged. “Probably.”

It wasn’t the answer Izzy was looking for. Scowling, she turned back to Dominic. “Are you coercing her?”

“I am not.” His expression went from appalled to offended.

“Then why—”

Finn redirected the umbrella tip away from Dominic’s midsection. “I don’t think that’s our business, Iz,” he said to his wife quietly.

“But—”

“You don’t have to worry about her,” Dominic said firmly. “I’m not going to beat her. I’m not going to mistreat her. I’m not going to tie her up and dye her hair brown. I’m just going to marry her.”

Izzy didn’t look happy—or convinced.

But before she could argue, the door to the judge’s chambers opened just then and a pointy-chinned woman looked down her nose and said, “His

Honor will see you now.”

Dominic cast one more despairing glance at the assembled group and ushered them all in. He introduced himself, Finn and his wife, then drew Sierra forward.

His Honor took one look at her and his eyes bulged. His jaw flapped. His gaze went straight to Dominic. “I misunderstood. I thought when Harvey called, he said you wanted to get married...”

“I do.”

Sierra felt Dominic’s arm come around her as he hauled her close, just in case there was any question in the judge’s mind about who the intended bride was.

The judge’s eyebrows hiked halfway up his bald head. But at the sight of Dominic’s fingers tightening on her shoulder and his steely glare, His Honor nodded his head. “Very well. Come in.”

Dominic and Sierra went in. Trailing behind them were a pair of saucer-eyed red-headed twins, then Finn with Rip on his shoulders, and Izzy who carried a wriggling Crash.

The pointy-chinned woman let out an audible sigh, shut the door and left them to it.

The ceremony itself was an anticlimax.

The judge mumbled something about the power vested in him by the State of New York. Then he read lines out of a book.

Dominic repeated them.

Then the judge looked at Sierra and read more lines. She repeated them every time he paused and looked at her.

They were lines she’d heard a hundred times. Richer. Poorer. Sickness. Health. Nothing about obeying, thank God. She didn’t think she could ever obey anyone. Not even Dominic.

Especially not Dominic!

She slanted a glance at the man standing so stiffly beside her in his two-thousand-dollar tailored suit and his hand-made Italian shoes. She caught just a glimpse of the edge of his subdued gray-and-burgundy striped tie. It was the same tie...

“...till death do you part?”

Sierra jerked her mind away from his tie—the tie that had started it all. She gathered herself together, recollected the solemnity of the occasion and

dutifully stared straight ahead. Behind her one of the twins sighed. Rip gave a little hop. Crash gurgled. Finn and Izzy sucked in their breaths.

The judge looked at her over the top of his glasses. She smiled back at him. He cocked his head and looked at her expectantly.

Beside her, Dominic cleared his throat. She glanced over at him. He gave her a speaking look, the sort she was sure he gave underlings right before he put them through the paper shredder.

Sierra gave him one right back.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. His fingers strangled hers. He nudged her clunky boot with his polished black dress shoe. "Well, damn it, do you?" he muttered through his teeth.

Sierra blinked. "Do I what?"

"Take him for your lawful wedded husband, young lady?" the judge said impatiently.

Sierra suddenly realized they'd been waiting for her. "Oh!" she said, then gave them all a blinding smile. "Sure. Why not?"

CHAPTER TWO

SURE. WHY NOT?

As if it were that easy.

It wasn't—as Dominic well knew. He'd tried it once twelve years ago, and had regretted it ever since.

He'd had nightmares for years about that disastrous day—that sunny June morning in the Bahamas when he'd been left at the altar in front of two hundred avidly curious onlookers.

He knew he could never do it again. Knew he couldn't face a huge production, a mob of people, a bride he had to count on, a wedding he had to wait for.

Well, he hadn't had to wait for this one.

He'd accomplished the whole thing, start to finish, engagement to ceremony, in a matter of hours.

And now he was married.

To a purple-haired woman with raccoon eye-shadow eyes.

What had he done?

The words reverberated in his head almost as insistently as Sierra's bright, "Sure. Why not?" But he glanced at his watch and knew he didn't really have time to think about it now.

Finn kissed the bride. "How about we take you out for a champagne toast?"

"Sure," Izzy seconded. "It's the least we can do on such short notice."

"Great!" Sierra said brightly.

But Dominic shook his head. "Thanks, but we can't. Another time. We've got to meet my father for dinner."

And with a quick handshake and a few more words of thanks, he spirited Sierra away.

"What do you mean, we're meeting your father?" she protested as he steered her toward the elevator. "Your father's in town and you didn't even invite him?"

"You think he'd have stood there with his mouth shut, then wished us well?"

Sierra opened her mouth, then shut it again.

Dominic nodded grimly. He'd made his point. She'd met his father when her sister had married his brother. She'd had a glimpse of Douglas then. Not much, but he was fairly sure his trying to commandeer the wedding party and drive them to the reception in his Lincoln Town Car instead of the cars they'd arranged had made an impression.

They rode down in the elevator in silence. Sierra staring at the doors, Dominic at the top of her purple head.

What had he done?

He'd got married, that was all. Exactly what the old man had wanted.

But to Sierra Kelly, of all people!

Sierra Kelly with her purple hair and her Day-Glo spandex, with her clunky boots and ribbed black leggings. Yes, but, as he well knew, that wasn't all she had. She also had mile-long legs and kissable lips and a wicked teasing tongue. She made his blood sizzle and the windows steam.

He'd met a million more suitable women, but he'd never met one who'd set him on fire—except Sierra. He'd never met one he'd wanted to go to bed with more.

Or again.

He could have taken or left any one of the others. But not her.

They'd made wild passionate desperate love one night three months ago. He'd been reliving it every night since.

Half an hour ago he'd married her—to be a sober reliable married man, to put an end to his father's meddling—but mostly so tonight they could set the world on fire again.

But they had to get through dinner with his father first.

He tucked her into the same hired car and got in after her. Outside, rain slashed against the window. Horns honked as the driver cut into the traffic and began the journey uptown. The faint warmth of the spring afternoon had all but dissipated now. And against the far door Sierra seemed to be shivering inside her denim jacket.

"Are you cold?" Dominic asked.

She shook her head fiercely. "I'm fine." She wrapped her arms around her damned tackle box and sat hugging it like it was some great plastic shield. For an instant she glanced his way long enough to shoot him a quick flippant smile, then stared straight ahead again.

He still thought she looked like she was shaking.

So if she wasn't cold, was she nervous? *Sierra*? Not likely!

He doubted she'd ever been nervous in her life. He studied her out of the corner of his eye—her purple hair, her stubborn chin, her pert nose, her raccoon eyes. He fished in his pocket and thrust a clean handkerchief at her.

"Here. Wipe your face. You've got eye gunk all down your cheeks."

Sierra looked startled. Then, "Thank you so much," she said with false politeness, making him wonder if she'd rather appear in public looking like a raccoon.

But she snatched the handkerchief out of his hand and pressed the button to roll down the window.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

She thrust his handkerchief outside into the rain. "Unless you'd rather I spit in it?"

Dominic flushed. "Of course not."

"I didn't think so." When she decided the handkerchief was sufficiently damp, she put the window back up and scrubbed at her cheeks. It took two more dousings of the handkerchief, followed by so much scrubbing he thought she'd rub the skin off her cheeks.

Finally she quit and turned to look at him. "Satisfied?"

Now she just looked like a prizefighter with two black eyes. Dominic didn't say so, though. Apparently his silence said it for him.

Sierra shrugged. "Well, let's just hope I get a chance to stop in the ladies' room before your father arrives." She stuffed his handkerchief in the pocket of her jacket, then folded her arms around the tackle box again.

She looked young and innocent—even in her purple-haired insouciance—and he wondered if he ought to coach her so she wouldn't feel out of place.

But, of course, she would *be* out of place—it was part of the reason he'd married her, after all. He felt a twinge of guilt and promptly smothered it.

No one had made her say yes!

Besides, there was no point in telling her how to behave or how to act. If he tried she'd bite his head off, he was sure. And anyway, her very presence, looking as she did, *was* her act.

Still, he couldn't quite leave it there.

"Do you need anything?" he asked her. It seemed like the least he could do. "A briefing?"

She looked at him, incredulous. "To meet your father?"

“Never mind,” he said, feeling like a fool. “Well, fine. If there’s nothing you need—” he picked up his briefcase, set it on his lap and opened it “—I’ve got work to do.”

She was married.

To Dominic Wolfe.

It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so real. If he hadn’t been sitting less than a foot away from her in his suit that probably cost more than two months’ rent on her apartment. If he hadn’t had his nose stuck in papers that Sierra was sure had to do with a merger that would allow him control of more wealth than the average small country.

Had she lost her mind?

Apparently. Never very much given to second guessing herself, even Sierra couldn’t refrain from second guessing this.

What on earth had possessed her? Why had she said yes to Dominic’s outlandish proposal?

She knew he didn’t love her.

Most of the time he barely acted as if he even liked her!

Except in bed.

In bed they were dynamite. In bed things happened that Sierra wouldn’t have believed could ever happen—especially between Dominic and herself.

Out of bed, though, she feared they had nothing in common at all.

He was using her against his father. He’d admitted as much.

Well, she was using him to help Frankie, she reminded herself. And she hadn’t even admitted that.

Not that he would care. He wouldn’t even ask. He’d just cut the check.

Her husband. *Dominic Wolfe!*

“Someday,” her mother used to warn her, “you’re going to bite off more than you can chew, missy.”

“Someday, kiddo,” her far more blunt farmer father used to say, “you’re going to leap without thinking and land headfirst in the manure pile.” Only he hadn’t said manure pile. He’d been a little more graphic.

That was about where Sierra felt she’d landed right now.

She shivered inside her jacket and considered opening the door and throwing herself out into traffic. With luck she’d be squashed by a passing taxi.

With *her* luck, she'd be knocked over by a bicycle messenger and Dominic would simply peel her off the pavement, mop her off and trundle her away to meet with his father.

God.

It was as close to a prayer as Sierra had been in a while. She was not big on praying. It wasn't that she didn't believe in God. Or prayer. She did. But for the weak and the downtrodden and the desperate.

Not for herself. And definitely not when it came to asking for things. Asking was for people who couldn't help themselves.

Sierra had always been sure she could.

Until now.

What on earth was she going to do now?

She shot a quick glance at the man sitting next to her. He had his briefcase open on his lap and was running his pen down a column of figures. His *pen* probably cost more than the rent on her apartment!

But it wasn't just about money. It was about style. About values. About their whole very different approaches to life.

Like this restaurant they were heading toward.

She didn't dare hope that Dominic was taking her to an uptown diner or a groovy little club for his little tête-à-tête with daddy.

No, it was bound to be one of those stuffy obnoxious places, all wood-paneling and hunt club prints of dogs with dead birds in their mouths. A muffled elegant place where the maître d' would look down his ski-jump of a nose and seat her behind a potted palm—if he even deigned to seat her at all.

What if they didn't even let her in?

A momentary shaft of humiliation and panic stabbed her in the gut before she realized that of course they would let her in.

She was going to be on the arm of Dominic Wolfe. He'd cow them and loom over them and pass them fifty bucks on the side and they might look askance, but they'd let her in.

And then they'd spill soup in her lap.

Or expect that she'd do it herself.

She started to bite her thumbnail, then jammed her hand into the pocket of her jacket. She was *not* going to bite her nails in front of Dominic. It was why she painted them wild and outrageous colors in the first place—so she'd remember not to bite them.

She wasn't going to betray by the slightest flicker that her heart was in her throat and that her stomach was in knots.

No, sir. She wasn't.

She'd learned long ago that fear got you nowhere. Her older sister Mariah had taught her that back when Sierra was only seven years old.

In those days her biggest terror had been water. When she was four, Terry Graff had knocked her into the swimming pool. She'd swallowed half of it before her father had fished her out. For the next three years she hadn't stuck a toe in.

While all the other kids had laughed and splashed and swam and played, she'd stood quaking on the side, watching. Then some of the bigger kids had realized she was afraid—and instead of leaving her alone, they'd dragged her in.

She'd gone kicking and screaming and flailing and floundering. She'd made a complete fool of herself before Mariah had run at them with a stick and scared them off. When she'd dragged Sierra, shaking and crying back out, she'd said the seven most important words anyone had ever told her.

"You can't let them see you're afraid."

Sierra had done her damndest never to let anyone see her fears ever since.

She'd spent her life making sure she got over them. And, if she had to say so herself, she'd done a bang-up job. She'd outgrown her early panics. She'd discovered the world was a pretty dandy place.

But every once in a while she felt like that little girl on the poolside. But she wasn't going to show it. She was going to march right up to the restaurant and, even if she resembled a Day-Glo raccoon, she was going to look them straight in the eye and never bat a lash.

Dominic might well be sorry he'd asked her to be his bride.

But he'd never feel sorry for her.

She'd see to that!

The maître d' was agog.

His normally impassive features became positively animated at the sight of Dominic and his guest. For a split second his eyes gawped. But then he schooled his features, stiffened his spine and assumed an expression of something that might best be described as "determined indifference."

As well it might be, Dominic thought. If he was willing to pay Le Sabre's exorbitant prices, he ought to be able to bring his damn dog to dinner if he so chose!

Gripping Sierra firmly by the arm, he smiled at the maître d'. "Good evening, Flaubert. Has my father arrived?"

Flaubert fixed a thin smile on his face. "He has, Mr. Wolfe. He and the lady and the other gentleman arrived a few moments ago. They've already been seated. I understood you were to be four for dinner?" One brow lifted, but he determinedly did not look at Sierra.

Dominic's back stiffened. "There's been a change in plans."

For a split second the maître d' seemed about to argue. Then his mouth pressed into a tight line and beckoned a waiter. The man scurried to his side. At Flaubert's whispered words, he shot an astonished gaze in their direction, then nodded and hurried toward the dining room.

"It will take just a moment." Flaubert paused. Once more his gaze skated right over Sierra to focus on Dominic. "Would the...young lady...like to...check her coat and er...?" He eyed the tackle box with distaste.

"I'll keep it, thanks," Sierra said before Dominic could open his mouth.

But it was as if she hadn't spoken. Flaubert continued to look at Dominic for an answer.

Dominic's teeth came together and he put an arm around her shoulders. "We will check the box. I think it might get in the way in the dining room, don't you?" He looked to Sierra for a nod which, after a moment's stubbornness, he got. Then he turned back to the maître d'. "My wife will keep her coat, thank you."

Flaubert's jaw sagged as Dominic had been sure it would.

Stepping around him, Dominic handed over the box to the woman behind at the cloak room. Then, pocketing the token she gave him, he steered Sierra into the dining room.

His father, Tommy Hargrove and a sleek blond woman were no longer sitting at the table his father regularly claimed. Instead they were sitting behind a potted palm, looking discomfited and annoyed as a waiter finished laying an extra place setting and stepped away.

A sound something akin to a smothered snigger emanated from Sierra. Dominic looked down at her. "Something funny?"

She flashed a grin. "The palm tree. I knew they'd have a palm tree."

And that they'd put you behind it, he finished for her. A corner of his own mouth twisted and his fingers tightened on her arm. "Screw 'em," he muttered and was instantly rewarded when Sierra grinned again.

Just then Douglas spotted them, and Dominic had the pleasure of seeing the old man's jaw rival Flaubert's. Almost instantly, though, it snapped shut again and Douglas took a deep breath as he rose to his feet. His gaze fixed on Dominic and his hard blue eyes glittered. It was belied by his smooth tone.

"How nice that you've brought a guest to join us. I don't believe we've met?" He, at least, was facing Sierra head-on. In fact he stared straight into the magenta and the Day-Glo peeking out from behind the denim and didn't even blink. Dominic was impressed.

"We have, actually," Sierra said cheerfully, offering her hand. "I'm Sierra Kelly. Mariah's sister. My hair was blonde for the wedding," she added, presumably by way of explaining why he might not have recognized her.

"Oh!" Douglas's relief was palpable as he took her hand and shook it heartily. "Yes! Oh my, yes. Of course. I do recognize you now. The, um, purple threw me for a moment. My son Rhys's wife's little sister!" he explained to Tommy and the blonde who had to be Viveca.

Dominic smiled and corrected this misconception. "Mariah's little sister," he agreed. "And my wife."

He had to give his father credit.

By barely more than a flicker of a muscle in his jaw and a sudden paleness around his mouth, did Douglas betray that Dominic's arrival with a wife in tow was even unexpected, much less a shock.

Instead he kissed Sierra's cheek and introduced them both to Viveca Moore.

She was exactly as his father described her—blonde, brilliant, and sophisticated. The perfect accessory.

A far cry from the woman whom an hour ago he'd made his wife.

Dominic never knew if Viveca had any idea she was supposed to be *his* date this evening. Douglas took hold of her hand and said smoothly that he was sorry they hadn't been able to make the wedding, and then called for a bottle of champagne.

“To toast you both,” he said, the glitter in his hard blue eyes the only sign that he was less than pleased.

Champagne, Dominic remembered with a qualm, had been his and Sierra’s downfall at Rhys and Mariah’s wedding.

It was the champagne that had made them reckless, that had fanned the flames of desire that had been raging between them since the day they’d met. It was the champagne that had made them challenge each other, that had tipped them over the edge and sent them to that hotel room to slake their desperate desire.

“I don’t know—” he began.

But Sierra said brightly, “What a lovely idea.” Then she explained, “We’ve been in such a hurry all day, we didn’t have time to toast our marriage earlier with our friends.” She turned her gaze on Dominic and he saw the challenge in her eyes.

“Then we must do it now,” Douglas said firmly. He gave Dominic a hard smile and, when the waiter arrived, poured and passed out glasses of champagne. Then he raised his own, first to Sierra, then to Dominic.

“To my son,” he said, “and his new wife. May you share a long, long, long life together.”

If he’d said one more “long” Dominic would have throttled him. As it was, he noted there was no wish for happiness. He wondered if Sierra noticed.

Her eyes were laughing as she touched her glass to his. “And a happy one,” she said.

Their glasses clinked.

“Hear, hear!” cried Tommy Hargrove.

“We wish you great happiness,” Viveca said with etiquette book politeness. “Don’t we, Douglas?”

“Yes, of course,” Douglas said hastily. “Indeed we do.” He poured more champagne, then looked at his son. “Dominic, don’t you have a toast for your bride?”

Dominic raised his glass to the challenge, first to his father, then to his wife. “To Sierra,” he said gravely, “who has made me the happiest of men.”

He meant it as a slap at his father. As a bit of veiled sarcasm. But as he drank, Dominic realized that, in some small way, it was the truth.

For one steamy night three months ago, Sierra had made him happier than he’d ever been in his life.

She'd made him silly and hungry and passionate. She'd made him forget mergers and balance sheets and the rat race he called his life. She'd made him laugh and tease and wrestle and grow sweaty and desperate and, finally, fulfilled.

He hadn't forgotten.

It was, after all, why he'd asked her to marry him. But he wasn't fool enough to expect it to last.

Outside of bed, they had nothing in common. Inside it, for one night at least, they'd had bliss.

"To Sierra," he said firmly. "My wife."

They drank staring into each other's eyes. Hers were no longer laughing, he noticed. They were shiny, as if they held tears. But that was ridiculous. Sierra never cried! She wasn't the type. And she would certainly not get soppy about a marriage like theirs.

"I have a toast," Tommy said suddenly.

Everyone turned to look at the snowy-haired old man as he raised his glass and looked at Dominic over the top of it. "This was a spur of the moment affair, I trust?"

Dominic stiffened, but Sierra laced her fingers through his and nodded. "Yes. Dominic swept me off my feet."

"Ah." Tommy beamed at her.

Douglas fixed Dominic with a glare. But Tommy didn't notice. He was nodding enthusiastically. "Thought so." He raised his glass higher. "Just like Bernice and I. Sometimes," he said with a sweet sad smile, "the best things happen on the spur of the moment. Bernice—God rest her soul—and I knew each other only a week when we eloped." His voice wavered a little and he paused to collect himself. Then, eyes brimming, he murmured, "Fifty-three years. We were married fifty-three years. The best fifty-three years any man could have." His hand shook briefly, but then he drew a breath and it steadied.

Dominic had known Tommy Hargrove his whole life. He'd known Bernice who'd died last year. He supposed he'd never thought about them as young and impetuous. Tommy was a tough-as-nails old man. Bernice had been his dutiful wife—always there with a smile or a gentle laugh. Now Dominic remembered those smiles, remembered how often they'd been directed at Tommy. He looked at the old man with new and wondering eyes.

“To the surprises in life,” Tommy said with a smile. He touched each of their glasses.

“Thank you,” Sierra said to him. Then she turned to Dominic and clinked her glass against his. There was a stubborn tilt to her chin and a fierce gleam in those bright blue eyes.

“To us,” she said. “And the next fifty-three years.”

In high school Sierra had played Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. She’d fallen down the rabbit hole, chatted with Humpty Dumpty, been spoken down to by a caterpillar, had tea with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, and had been chased through the forest by a pack of cards while the red queen had screamed, “Off with her head!”

That all seemed downright normal compared to the dinner she’d just survived.

She sank into the back seat of the taxi, clutching her tackle box, and shut her eyes. She was dimly aware that Dominic had climbed in beside her and was speaking to the driver. As the car began to move, she heard Dominic sigh as he settled back next to her. She kept her eyes shut and waited for him to speak. But he didn’t say a word.

Maybe he was as tired as she was.

Acting did that to her. Drained her. Left her limp and exhausted. Playing Alice back in high school had wrung her out.

This had been harder. Lots harder. That she’d rehearsed for. This had been complete improvisation. And while she thought she’d acquitted herself well enough, she was still exhausted. She just wanted to go home and go to bed.

She didn’t open her eyes until the taxi stopped.

“We’re here,” Dominic said.

Sierra hauled herself up and blinked as she looked around. Then she jerked upright and her eyes went wide. “Where? This isn’t my place!”

“Of course not. It’s mine.” Dominic was handing the driver some money and opening the door. “Come on.”

But Sierra couldn’t. She stayed right where she was. “I’m not going to your place!”

Out of the car, he bent down to stare at her. “You’re not—*Why not?*” He looked white-faced and furious.

“Because I’m not! I never agreed to—”

“You agreed to marry me. You did marry me.” His voice was icy.

“I know, but—”

“Marriage implies cohabitation,” he reminded her. He was gritting his teeth.

“Not...not necessarily.” It was one thing to have mad passionate sex with Dominic. It was entirely another to get sucked up into his apartment, his world, his life! She folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not getting out,” she told the taxi driver. “I need to go downtown.”

“The hell you do!” Dominic protested.

But Sierra ignored him and gave the driver her address.

“You can’t—!”

The driver flipped on the meter, then glanced at Dominic. “Mister, you gotta shut the door.”

“No. I don’t. She’s not—!”

“Yes, I am. Now. Drive,” Sierra commanded the driver. “Go on!”

“No!” Dominic resolutely held the door open, not moving an inch.

The driver looked from one to the other of them, annoyed. “I got a business here.”

“So take me—”

“No!”

“D’youse two suppose youse could maybe settle this somewhere else?” the taxi driver said plaintively.

“Yes,” Dominic said.

“No,” Sierra said.

Their gazes locked. They glared.

“Please!” the taxi driver implored them.

Sierra clutched her box and didn’t budge.

Finally Dominic flung himself back into the cab and slammed the door “Fine. Take us to her place.” He challenged Sierra to contradict him. “We’ll stay there.”

“You can’t stay here!” Sierra said for the umpteenth time as Dominic followed her up the narrow stairway to her flat.

“You refused to stay at my place,” he reminded her. It was getting hard to breathe, and not from the three-floor climb. Rather it was a result of

being on eye level with Sierra's curvy bottom the whole way up. Her denim mini-skirt barely seemed to cover it. And it didn't matter that the rest of her was discreetly covered in black ribbed leggings, Dominic had a good imagination.

And a good memory.

At last Sierra stopped in front of a tall metal door. She fitted a key into a lock, undid it, moved on to another one, undid that, then unlocked a third, and pushed open the door. "It doesn't mean you had to come here."

"Apparently it does, if I want to spend my wedding night with my bride." He followed on her heels, suspecting that she would shut the door on him if he gave her half a chance.

Apparently the thought had occurred to her, because the color was high in her cheeks and she aimed a disgusted look in his direction when he shut the door himself and leaned against it, arms folded across his chest, smiling at her.

She set down her tackle box and stood glaring at him from the other end of the tiny room. "Well, you can't. Not here. It's not big enough." She waved an arm and practically hit one of the walls. "There's no room."

Dominic shrugged indifferently. "It was your choice."

"It was not my choice! I didn't invite you here."

"But you refused to come home with me," he said reasonably.

"I don't need to come home with you! I went to dinner with you! I shocked your father for you. I stopped Viveca from marrying you. What more do you want?"

"Fifty-three years."

"What!"

Dominic raked a hand through his hair. He shoved away from the wall, wanting to pace, to move, but there was no room. "Nothing!" he muttered. "Never mind. You're the one who said it."

"Tommy's the one who said it."

"And who raised her glass in toast?"

"Would you rather I'd said, 'Oh, how about six months?' Your father would really have taken us seriously then."

"How the hell is he going to take it seriously if you won't come home with me?"

She wrapped her arms across her breasts. "He doesn't have to know that."

“Of course he’ll know! He’s probably got someone tailing after the cab right now, just watching. I’m surprised he didn’t demand to see the license.”

Actually Douglas would never do any such thing—not in public anyway. He wouldn’t want to admit that Dominic had bested him. “He expects us to be together. I’m staying.” He began to loosen his tie.

“Stop that!”

“What?”

“Undressing!”

“You’ve seen me with my tie undone,” Dominic reminded her mockingly as he yanked it off, tossed it on the chair, then undid the top button of his starched white shirt. “You did very creative things with my tie, as I recall.” Things that, remembered, could still send shivers straight to his groin.

Sierra turned bright red. “That was then!”

“And now we’re married” He arched a brow. “Do you only have sex with single men?”

“I’ve never had sex with a married one!”

“It’s allowed,” he told her. “When you’re married to him.”

He finished unbuttoning his shirt and stripped it off, then tugged his T-shirt over his head. The chill in the room was a shock to his heated flesh. He wanted to go to her and wrap her in his arms.

But all the while she watched him like a fawn caught in headlights. Swell, she was going to turn into Bambi. Sierra, of all people. Who’d have guessed?

Dominic’s hand went to his belt. She sucked in a breath. He glared at her, annoyed. “Are you going to pretend this isn’t why you said yes?” he asked.

She blinked rapidly, then swallowed, and he thought for a moment she would deny wanting him at all. But finally she gave a jerky nod. “Only partly.”

“Right.” His jaw tightened. “There was the check, too. The little matter of half a million bucks.”

She scowled. “The money had nothing—well, almost nothing—to do with it,” she told him defiantly.

He would have liked to ask what the hell she intended to do with half a million dollars, but right now it wasn’t important. He didn’t care. He wanted another more important answer. “Fine. Then why fight it? It’s what

we want. What we *both* want. Unless you only believe in one-night stands?”

“Of course not!”

“Then maybe you’re a chicken.”

Her eyes flashed. “I’m never a chicken!”

“No?” Dominic challenged softly. “Then prove it.”

For a long moment she didn’t move. Then something changed. A gleam came into her eyes, a gleam he remembered once before. The corners of her mouth turned up in a smile that set his heart to pounding. And quite deliberately Sierra reached out and snagged his tie from where he’d tossed it on the chair.

She ran it through her fingers as she stepped forward to meet him. And his heart slammed against his chest as she whispered, “How nice of you to remember I had a use for this.”

They should have gone to his place.

They wouldn’t have to smash together on her hard narrow futon. At Dominic’s they could no doubt wallow in sybaritic luxury in Dominic’s bed.

But she hadn’t been able to do it. Not then.

So she consoled herself that even if they had they wouldn’t have noticed.

Once it was clear that neither of them had got the other out of their system during that one night in a Kansas motel—it didn’t matter where they were.

The awareness, the attraction, the chemistry—*everything!*—between them simply sizzled!

Something about Dominic brought out parts of Sierra she’d never even guessed were there. Something about his power made her want to challenge him. Something about his starchy conservative demeanor she wanted to muss. And his control—his iron-clad control!—she just couldn’t rest until she made it snap.

And she’d made it snap!

She’d moved in on him like a tigress stalking her prey. Circling, smiling, watching him from beneath lowered lids, Sierra had moved closer,

turned, stepped and backed him into the futon. Then she'd looped the tie around his nape and slid it back and forth. Silk and skin. Hot damp skin.

She saw him take a quick sharp breath.

She smiled. She gave the tie a tug and drew him toward her, so close she could almost feel his heart pounding against his chest, so close the heat of her breath ruffled the hair that curled there. She touched one flat male nipple with her tongue.

Dominic bit off an exclamation. Then he hauled her hard against him and he was much too close to see.

Her hands pressed against the hot smooth flesh of his back as she lifted her mouth, hungry for his.

Sierra was no stranger to kisses. Since she'd turned thirteen she'd had boyfriends, steadies, casual dates, one after another, men-in-her-life galore. And they'd kissed her—if not one and all, then certainly most.

But she'd never been kissed like this.

There had never been such hunger, such passion, such sheer intensity in any man's mouth on hers. Only Dominic's.

Before that fateful night in Kansas, Sierra had thought that whatever it was that had been sizzling between her and Dominic since they'd met was nothing more than that—an insubstantial, unreal, ephemeral something—like steam.

Just so much hot air.

She'd been wrong. Big time. One kiss and she'd been knocked off her feet—and she'd knocked Dominic off his.

One fierce hungry kiss, almost before they'd got the door closed behind them and had tumbled onto the hard motel bed. They'd practically ripped each other's clothes off in their haste to come together. The kissing, the touching, the stroking, the loving had been hot and fierce.

And their hunger for each other hadn't slacked even after they'd climaxed.

They'd lain in each other's arms, then rolled apart. But within moments they had come together again. They'd touched and taunted, caressed and teased, and kissed and kissed and kissed the whole night long.

In some unspoken agreement, as if they were determined to get enough of each other, to become sated, to be able to happily turn away in the morning and leave each other behind, they had made love again and again.

Once on the plane to New York the next morning, he in first class and she in economy, they had gone their separate ways, determined to forget. And they had—but not for long.

Memories of Dominic came back. The desire came back. It slipped into Sierra's mind in the dark of night. It teased her at odd moments in the light of day. When she was cooking spaghetti and getting a face full of steam, she would find herself remembering the heat of Dominic's kiss. When she was combing out someone's hair, she would recall the soft brush of his. When she saw a man in a tux get out of a cab across Broadway, she almost got run over craning her neck to see if it was the man she remembered stripping off his tux and making sweet hot love to her.

She'd dreamed about him.

She'd wanted him again at the same time she'd told herself he couldn't make it happen again. There was no way.

But once more she'd been wrong.

He was making it happen right now!

He turned them around and bore her back onto the futon, his fingers trembling as he fought to unbutton her denim jacket. He muttered when he couldn't manage it easily, and Sierra touched his hands.

"Let me."

He shook his head fiercely. His eyes seemed to glitter and the skin was taut across his cheekbones. "No. I want to."

So she let him.

Though her heart thudded within her chest and she longed to urge him on, she made herself wait, made herself watch, let herself smile at his fervent fumbings, at his mutterings and final sigh of relief when eventually he got the buttons open and peeled the jacket from her shoulders and tossed it aside.

She thought he'd go after her spandex top with equal gusto, but he paused instead and sat back just gazing at her, a rapt hungry look on his face.

"Stop that," she muttered self-consciously and she tugged at the tie she had still looped against the back of his neck, trying to take back the initiative.

But he just shook his head. Then, with a finger, he traced the line of her top against the swell of her breasts. He bent his head and did it again with the tip of his tongue. It was deliberate, provocative, erotic.

It made her shiver and tug again on his tie. “Wolfe!”

He smiled and slowly peeled her top up, then tugged it over her head and it followed her jacket to the floor. Then with his hands he caressed her breasts. Stroked them. Teased them. Made her wriggle beneath his touch.

“*Wolfe!*”

“Mmm?” It was somewhere between a growl and a purr and was the sexiest sound she’d ever heard. She remembered it from that night in Kansas when he’d looked down on her, touched her, teased her, eased himself inside her.

She’d lain awake some nights trying to reproduce it. She hadn’t come close.

And now Sierra struggled not to clutch at him as he purred again and bent his head to feather kisses across her breasts.

She slid the tie in her fingers and pressed her hands against his shoulders as the kisses moved south.

She felt them lightly on her belly, and at every dip of his head, his soft hair brushed tantalizingly against her sensitive breasts. Her fingers slid up his neck and dug into his hair. It was black as a raven’s wing and soft as silk. She lifted her head to touch her nose to it, reveling in the smell of some very costly, subtly masculine shampoo.

There was nothing subtle about the rest of Dominic’s masculinity. For all that he had to spend most of his life behind a desk, his body was hard and well-muscled. He made those starched shirts of his look damn good.

But he looked better without a shirt at all.

Without *anything* at all!

Suddenly she was impatient to see the rest of Dominic again. She had lived on memories for three months. She wanted the real thing.

She eased her fingers out of his hair and began to caress the back of his neck. As he kissed her belly, she rubbed the silk of the tie back and forth against his shoulders.

Then, leaving it there, her hands moved further, sliding down the hot smooth skin of his back until they reached his belt. She traced the line of it around his midsection and felt his muscles tighten. He sucked in his breath at the brush of her fingers against the sensitive skin of his abdomen.

As she eased down his zipper, he tugged off her skirt and cast it aside. Shoes, slacks, socks and leggings followed.

At last they were down to bare essentials. Or nearly bare.

When he peeled off her panties, she didn't demur. When his kisses moved lower, she knotted her fingers and tugged at his hair. The low rumbling purr became more of a growl and he lifted his head to grin at her. "Like that?"

"No," she muttered. "Hate it. What do you think?"

He laughed. It was a smoky laugh, a teasing laugh. And when he bent his head to press the kisses more intimately still, as much as she would have liked to just lie there and savor it, she wasn't giving him that much control.

She plucked the tie up again and slid it down his back. She touched him with it, teased him with it, tantalized him with it. She rubbed it over his body, across his chest, between his legs.

She heard his breath come in a harsh gasp. "Like that?" she purred.

"Tease. Devil. Minx." He was breathing hard, his face was flushed, the skin taut. She could feel the hardness of him, the need. She slid the tie around and over, back and forth.

"Si-errrrrr-a!"

She laughed. It was a throaty laugh, a self-satisfied laugh—and it turned into a gasp, too, when Dominic's mouth caught her unawares.

They twisted, they turned, they tangled and wrestled. Gently but fiercely. Determined to give each other the ultimate pleasure.

And finally, when she thought she could bear it no longer, Dominic parted her legs and slid in.

Sierra welcomed him. Her body stilled, settled, softened.

And Dominic, embraced, shuddered against her, trembling, scrabbling for the last vestiges of control.

And he might have managed to regain it if Sierra hadn't shifted beneath him, hadn't dug her heels against the backs of his thighs, hadn't grinned and said, "What are you waiting for, Wolfe?"

He looked startled. Then he grinned. "Not a damn thing!" He drew back just a little, then thrust deeper.

Sierra met him halfway, her hips rocking, her fingers clenching, her body moving as easily and eagerly as his. He might have lost control, but she wasn't far behind and she knew it.

Two more desperate thrusts and he was over the edge. "I can't—!"

"Shh!" She arched against him, her nails digging into his back as she rode the crest of his climax to an equally shattering one of her own.

It was every bit as incredible as it had been that night in Kansas.

But could you build a marriage on it?
That was what Sierra wanted to know.

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN he awoke there was a woman wrapped around him. Dominic's eyes jerked wide and his whole body went rigid at the shock.

Who? What?

He never slept with the women he had sex with. Never! So how had he —? He eased his head back to peer down at the head resting on his chest.

It was purple.

It all came back like a punch to the gut. His father. Viveca. The ultimatum.

His marriage.

To Sierra.

God.

He was married to Sierra Kelly. He had *slept* with Sierra Kelly! He held himself absolutely still and tried to think. It wasn't easy.

Not with Sierra in his arms.

The sudden tension in his body seemed to disturb her. She sighed and wriggled closer, her fingers curving against his ribs, one of her legs slid over his. Her thigh rubbed against his groin. She tucked her foot between his knees, wiggled it, then slid it down his calf. And up again.

Dominic stopped breathing.

Sierra didn't. She shifted and nuzzled him and he felt her soft breath stirring the hair on his chest. Then her lips brushed one hard nipple.

Dominic sucked air.

He was used to the early morning reactions of his body. He wasn't used to turning into the rock of Gibraltar.

He wanted her now. Again.

Physically. Only physically, he assured himself.

But, ye gods, he sure as heck wanted her physically. What would she think if he woke her and wanted to make love with her again?

He squelched the thought. A glance at the clock on her dresser said it was already ten past seven. He needed to get up and get out now—preferably before she woke.

He didn't know how to deal with morning-after awkwardness. Except for the night in the motel with Sierra, he'd always left before dawn. He didn't know what one did upon waking up with a woman—and he damned sure didn't know how to handle waking up with a wife!

The one thing he did know was that it would be a whole lot easier if he were dressed and not primed to pop at her merest touch.

Carefully, holding his breath, Dominic slid his body out from beneath her. It wasn't easy. Whenever he moved away, she snuggled closer, cuddling in, wrapping her arm around his waist.

Worse, he liked it. He liked the feel of her fingers tucked against his side. He liked the weight of her in his arms. He liked the softness of her skin against the roughness of his own.

He wanted to stay right where he was.

He didn't. One centimeter at a time, he edged his way off the futon, bunching up the comforter and tucking it against Sierra's sleeping form so she wouldn't miss him when he was gone.

His heel touched the floor. He squirmed the last few inches—and came free. Silently he got to his feet—and stood looking down at Sierra.

She looked vulnerable. How odd. With her outrageous hair and wild clothes, not to mention her stubborn chin, smart mouth and flashing eyes, she'd always seemed hard-as-nails and extraordinarily well-defended.

Not now. The purple hair framed a surprisingly innocent-looking face. Innocent? Sierra?

It didn't seem likely. But she certainly looked it now.

Because, he told himself, at this very moment she wasn't trying to cut him to shreds or shatter every last bit of his control.

She got enormous joy out of doing that. She'd done it again last night.

But he'd done it to her as well, he thought with grim satisfaction. He'd made her crazy—exactly as she'd made him.

The itch to do it again now was almost overpowering.

But he wouldn't.

He was rational this morning. Determined. In control.

He was Dominic Wolfe, after all, and he had more important things to do.

Sierra awoke to see Dominic standing in front of her closet door mirror, knotting his tie at his throat.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, startled because she’d been having luscious, erotic dreams about Dominic Wolfe—dreams in which that tie played a prominent part—and to wake up and realize that those dreams had been based on the night’s reality made her cheeks burn.

What was even more shocking was remembering that a few hours before that she’d married him.

At her exclamation he turned, giving his tie one last tug. “Morning,” he said briskly. He gave her a quick smile, but didn’t look at her.

“Morning,” Sierra replied huskily and found herself dragging the sheet more closely around her, though he’d already seen everything there was—and seemed completely uninterested in looking again now.

He was grabbing his suit coat and shoving his arms into the sleeves. “Gotta run,” he said. “I’m going to be late.”

Sierra scowled at the clock. “It’s just past seven-thirty.”

“Right. But I have to go home first. Change clothes. Shave.” He rubbed a hand over stubbled cheeks. “I have a meeting at nine.” He picked up his briefcase and started for the door. “Bye.”

“Er...’bye,” Sierra said. But before he could get away, she hoisted herself to a sitting position, sheet clutched against her breasts. “Wolfe?”

He glanced back. “What?” He was all impatience now, eager to be gone.

As if she’d been nothing more than a good time, not the woman he married! Well, fine. If that’s the way he wanted it.

“Nothing,” she said frostily and gave a toss of her hair. “Goodbye.”

“Bye.” He went out. The door shut. A second later he was back, staring down at her, something hot and hungry in his eyes.

“What?” she demanded.

“I’ll see you tonight,” he said. “My place.” And bang, the door shut after him.

Just like that.

She fumed about it while she showered and dressed. She muttered while she fixed her hair. She supposed she shouldn’t have expected anything different from him. It wasn’t exactly a love match they had.

She wasn’t sure what they did have, besides sex.

She wasn’t sure what she wanted—besides sex.

Once upon a time marriage and children were exactly what she wanted. As a teenager she'd had no desperate career plans like her sister, Mariah. She'd never been a whiz kid. No colleges had come banging on her door. And she hadn't gone banging on theirs.

She'd thought that getting married and having babies was a great idea. Only she hadn't really wanted to marry Skip Grimes who was the closest thing she had to a boyfriend at the time. Skip hadn't really wanted to marry her, either, so it never became an issue.

The issue had been what to do after graduation if she wasn't going to go to college. Her aunt Kathy suggested she learn to cut hair.

"You can get a job, make money, get your own place. Move to Kansas City, maybe," her mother's younger sister suggested.

For Sierra, who had never felt she fitted in at home, moving to Kansas City sounded like heaven. Besides, learning to cut hair had to be more interesting—not to mention more useful—than knowing the causes of the First World War. And if she really could earn a living and move to Kansas City, there she might meet the man of her dreams—who would look and act nothing like Skip Grimes.

Everything went exactly the way she'd hoped—except she never met anyone in Kansas City who made Sierra's heart beat faster than Skip Grimes had. So three years later, when Mariah got a job as a staff writer on a New York City based lifestyle magazine, Sierra went with her.

She'd got a job in a trendy salon. They'd shared a tiny fifth floor walk-up in the East Village. They'd been awed by the city—its energy, its bustle, its opportunities—and then they'd plunged in.

The Kelly sisters had thrived in New York. Mariah went from junior staff writer to sought-after freelancer, a well-known writer whose personality pieces and in-depth interviews were snapped up as fast as she could turn them out.

Sierra, too, found a home for her talents.

She was very good at cutting hair. She was very good at styling hair, at studying her clients' bone structure and figuring out how to make them look their best. She wasn't afraid to be daring, to suggest color changes, to be bold. And the results were spectacular.

The salon sent her to Paris to study.

"To take advantage of your talent. So you can learn from the best," her boss told her.

Sierra, never given to study before, had been astonished. And eager. She'd pinched herself all the way to Paris, hardly believing her good luck.

She'd spent a year in Paris, learned everything they could teach her, dated half a dozen charming Frenchmen, but never found one better than Skip.

Still, it was in France that she met Finn MacCauley. He'd been shooting a high fashion layout on the Riviera, and she'd been one of three stylists doing the models' hair. Exacting and demanding and scathing in two languages, Finn routinely reduced stylists to tears.

But not Sierra. She let his tirades blow over her like so much hot air. Then she did what he wanted. They hit it off.

At the end of the week he said, "Let me know when you come back to New York."

When she did, he asked her to work with him. Her reputation grew. Not just for her ability with hair, but for her ability to deal with temperamental photographers, demanding ad agency reps, commercial clients, and the occasional prima donna model.

She was in demand—professionally and personally.

There were always plenty of men wanting to take her out. For years she'd gone—always hoping to find the one man she'd want to be with for the rest of her life.

But she'd never found him. And eventually she'd stopped thinking so much about it. She learned to love what she did, to be content with her life, to savor her friendships, to enjoy the dates she did go out on without looking for happily ever after.

Then along came Dominic.

He did to her heart, to her body, to her mind what legions of Skip Grimes clones had not. Mariah's corporate shark of a brother-in-law was the one man who'd ever made Sierra's heart beat faster, her brain sizzle, and her hormones sing.

What were there, eight million men in New York City?

Why him?

She'd tried to resist. She'd steered well clear of Dominic Wolfe after the day she'd bearded him in his office where she'd gone to learn Rhys's whereabouts. And even when she hadn't been able to stay totally away from him, like at Mariah's shower, she'd made it a point not to spare him a glance.

Or she'd tried not to.

It was like trying not to think of giraffes. It was all she'd thought of. Finally, at Mariah's and Rhys's wedding reception, even though she'd done her best to avoid him, the inevitable happened. They had to dance with each other. Rhys's best man, Mariah's maid of honor. And then, of course, they'd drunk champagne.

And danced more. And stared into each other's eyes. And finally had gone to that motel room, determined to get each other out of their systems.

It hadn't worked for Sierra.

Nor for Dominic either, apparently.

So now they were married. For better or worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health.

"In bed and out of it," Sierra muttered.

In her gut and in her heart she still thought she'd made the right decision.

She just needed to do her darnedest to make sure Dominic thought so, too.

In the meantime, though, she had something to give to Pammie.

Pammie didn't believe it.

Pammie stared at the check Sierra handed her, then she blinked, and stared again. Her jaw sagged and all the color drained from her face. "It's not real," she said. "It can't be real." Her fingers shook. She seemed almost to gasp for air.

"It's real," Sierra assured her. "I was at the bank when they cut it. It's made out to me, but it's for you—for Frankie—for the transplant."

"You're not serious," Pam said promptly, then looked at Sierra again and said, jaw sagging, "You *are*." Her breath seemed to almost rattle out of her. "Good lord."

Then as if she just that moment realized they were still standing in the open doorway, she grabbed Sierra and hauled her into her apartment, glancing over her shoulder toward Frankie's bedroom

"How did you—?" She studied the check again. "Who's Dominic Wolfe? And why did he loan you the money?"

"He didn't loan it. He gave it to me."

“Gave it to you? Why? In exchange for what?” Pam looked suddenly equal parts nervous and urgent. *“What’s he going to do to you?”*

“Nothing! Nothing I don’t want him to do,” Sierra qualified. *“It’s all right. We...we made a deal.”*

“What deal?”

Sierra shrugged. *“I married him.”*

Pam’s mouth opened. And shut. She looked appalled and horrified and then she shook her head fiercely. She thrust the check back at Sierra who put her hands behind her back. *“Well, you’re not going to do it! Never. You won’t. I won’t let you! Not even for Frankie. I—”*

“Pammie,” Sierra said gently, reaching out and folding Pam’s fingers over the check. *“It’s done. I already have.”*

Her friend’s fingers started to tremble, to crumple the check. Her eyes welled. *“Oh, Sierra! How could you?”*

“How could I not?” Sierra said simply. For Frankie she would have done a lot more terrifying things than marrying Dominic. She was actually feeling pretty good about marrying Dominic. *“And stop mashing it! It’s real. We’ll go cash it at lunch, okay?”*

Pam didn’t seem to be able to talk. But at least she nodded her head, then swallowed. *“You’re sure about this?”*

“Absolutely.”

Tears welled in Pam’s eyes. *“Oh, my God, you’re a life saver!”* And she threw her arms around Sierra, and Sierra felt the other woman’s body trembling. *“I kept telling myself,”* Pammie babbled, *“that if I prayed hard enough, trusted enough, bargained enough... But I didn’t expect you to be part of the bargain, Sierra!”*

Sierra smiled. *“This is my bargain. I wanted to do it.”*

“Who is he?”

“My brother-in-law’s brother.”

Pam gaped.

“It’s not incest!” Sierra said hotly.

“I know! I’m just...just...surprised. He’s not the brother-in-law who’s an arrogant jerk, then?” She remembered Sierra muttering more than once about Rhys’s bossy know-it-all brother.

“Er, well...he has one or two redeeming qualities,” Sierra muttered, cheeks burning.

“He is the jerk!”

“Yes, but he’s not *only* a jerk!” Sierra protested. “Besides it was his idea!”

“He just walked up to you yesterday and said, ‘Let’s get married?’”

“Actually, he did.”

Pammie’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because he’s madly in love with me?” It was a joke, of course. But Pammie didn’t hear that.

She looked vastly relieved. But still she said, “You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Sierra lied briskly. “Now I’m just off to work. But I’ll be back this afternoon and we can deposit the check. Is Frankie awake?”

“Yes. Go on in. He’ll be really glad to see you. He missed you last night. *Star Trek*,” she reminded Sierra.

Sierra banged her palm against her forehead. “I forgot.” Two evenings a week Frankie, Pam and Sierra watched old *Star Trek* videos. “We had to go out with his father,” she explained. “I’ll try not to miss the next one. Put the check away. I’ll go say hi to Frankie.”

Frankie was eight. When Sierra had moved into the apartment at the other end of the hall he had been a five-year-old bundle of energy—all arms and legs and boundless enthusiasm, his dark hair forever mussed, his blue eyes alight with excitement as every day he stopped by Sierra’s flat and told her about his adventures.

In the past year and a half his adventures had become less physical. He’d been home more, in school less. But the adventures he told her had become no less enthralling. He had created his own cast of characters and provided adventures for them. He wrote the stories on the computer, then printed and illustrated them. Frankie had his mother’s skill with a pen and pencil.

He was at his desk already, even though it was just past eight. He was still in pajamas, but he was intent on his work, his head bent over his paper.

When he heard her footsteps he turned, and a grin lit his face. “Hey, Sierra. Come see! I’m makin’ the most humungous tree house! It’s got a sun porch an’ a movie theater an’ a hangin’ staircase.” He jabbed the paper in front of him.

Frankie’s characters always lived in great places—detailed places that were masterpieces of fantasy and engineering that were actually even more fascinating than the adventures they had.

Sierra crossed the room and bent to study his latest creation. “Wow. I’d like to live in a place like that.” She ruffled a hand through his sleep-mussed hair.

“Pretty neat, huh? I’ll build you one someday,” Frankie promised. “A real one. When I’m an architect.”

When he was an architect...

That was his true love. For all that he created fanciful stories, the houses were a bigger passion. Becoming an architect was Frankie’s dream. The day she’d first met him, he’d said, “I’m gonna be an architect.”

“When I’m an architect...” was almost a daily refrain.

Lately just hearing those words hurt and made Sierra worry that they might not come true. But today they didn’t pain her the way they had. Now she could actually smile and tap the end of his nose and say, “A house like that? I’m going to hold you to it, buddy.”

Frankie grinned. Then he sobered. “You missed *Star Trek* last night.”

“I had to go out.”

“Where?”

“To dinner with a...with a friend.” She would explain about Dominic later. Now she gave him a tap on the nose. “I’ll catch you later, pal. Gotta run. Got to be uptown in—yikes!—twenty minutes.”

Pam was waiting in the living room, her cheeks aglow with color for the first time since the doctor had told her Frankie needed a transplant a month ago. Since then she’d been looking like her world was crumbling around her feet. Now she looked nervous, worried, and just the tiniest bit hopeful.

And when Sierra came back into the room, Pammie clutched her hands and started to cry.

“Stop that!” Sierra commanded, horrified. She snatched a tissue from the box on the desk and thrust it at Pammie. “Stop it right now!”

“I can’t help it. I know you said he loves you, but do you love him? It’s like you’re selling your soul and I’m just...just...*letting you!*”

“Of course I love him,” Sierra said, and wondered if she was lying or not. “I’m *not* selling my soul! I’m giving Frankie a chance. *Dominic* is giving Frankie a chance.”

“And you’ll be all right?” Pam was still worried.

“I’ll be fine. I’m going to live in a posh apartment and be Mrs. Dominic Got Rocks. How could I not be fine?”

“Money isn’t important,” Pammie protested, then had the grace to look abashed because they both knew that in this case—in Frankie’s case—it was.

Sierra gave her friend a gentle hug. “I know that. Dominic knows it, too.” At least she hoped he did.

Still Pammie shook her head and dabbed at her eyes.

Sierra gave her one last squeeze. “I have to get to work. I’m going to be late. I’ll see you later. Call your doctor and tell him it’s a go.”

“So, did you get a wife?” Shyla grinned as Dominic strode in.

“As a matter of fact, I did.” He gave her a blithe smile as he breezed through the reception area, grabbed his mail off her desk and strode into his office. Over his shoulder he saw Shyla staring after him openmouthed.

He shut the door and it banged right open again.

“Who?” Shyla demanded. She’d been his secretary for seven years. She knew him as well as anyone. She didn’t stand on ceremony with her boss.

“You don’t know her,” he said brusquely.

“Not the persistent Marjorie then.” Shyla had been deflecting Marjorie for him. Her eyes narrowed. “What did you do, grab the first woman you met?”

“No.” He made a pretense of riffling through his mail, hoping if she was ignored, she’d go away.

She didn’t budge. “Who?” she asked again.

“Her name’s Sierra,” he said finally when it was clear she wasn’t moving until he answered.

“And who is Sierra? Sounds sort of familiar?” Shyla got a faraway look in her eyes, as if she were mentally going back through all the women in Dominic’s address book.

“My sister-in-law’s sister,” he said grudgingly.

Shyla’s eyes went round. “The purple-haired one?” She clapped a hand over her mouth.

Dominic glared. “She’s a stylist. It’s her image.”

Shyla wiped the astonishment off her face. “Of course,” she said solemnly, but her eyes were twinkling and her lips were twitching.

“You liked her!” Dominic reminded her sharply.

"I said she was the only woman I'd met who could back you down," Shyla agreed, nodding her approval once more.

"Not the only one, obviously," Dominic replied dryly. "There's you."

"Besides me," Shyla said cheerfully. Then she grinned. "You and Sierra. How about that?" She looked positively gleeful. "I'll bet Daddy had a cow."

"Close," Dominic admitted.

Shyla laughed. "I'd like to have seen it. Good for you." Then she sobered. "But surely you didn't marry her just to annoy your father. Did you?" she pressed when he didn't reply at once.

Dominic glowered at her. "Of course not!" There was the sex, too, but he didn't see any reason to be specific.

Shyla looked relieved. She nodded, smiling, and gave him a quick hug. "Then, congratulations. I'm so happy you've fallen in love at last."

In love? Dominic blanched. Not quite! But he didn't think a denial was what Shyla wanted to hear. Edgily Dominic stepped away and pulled out one of the letters from the mail pile. "Get me the file on Harker," he told her. "This is a business. We have work to do."

And God knew he tried, for the entire day, to do it.

He studied the Harker file, twisted his tie around his fingers, and found instead that he wasn't thinking about Harker but about Sierra's activities with his tie the previous night.

He tossed the file aside. Obviously he needed to do something, not just read. So he paced his office, trying to compose a reply, something about the advances of the communications industry, but his mouth went dry as all he seemed to be able to think about was the ways Sierra had communicated her desire.

He slammed his fist into his other palm. Then he punched the intercom, and told Shyla to bring the letters she'd finished so he could read and sign them.

He saw—but scarcely read—the words on the page. In his mind he was seeing instead images of Sierra's parted lips, her creamy skin, that tiny dusting of freckles just above her breasts.

"Damn it!" He jumped out of his chair again and stood, hands braced on the desk, head bent, as he took deep lungfuls of air and tried to get her out of his mind.

He couldn't.

But not because he was in love with her, like Shyla thought! Absolutely not. It was just his libido. Hormones. All that testosterone which finally had someplace to go!

He wondered if Sierra was up yet. Maybe he could ring her, get her to meet him at his place for a quickie. God! What was he thinking? He *never* thought things like that!

Well, not never. Today, it seemed, he did.

All the while his assistant Kent Traynor discussed the Harker buyout with him, Dominic's mind wandered. He found himself idly staring at Traynor's solid navy tie and wondering if his wife had ever—

“—don't you think?”

“What?” Dominic jerked back to the moment, aware that he felt oddly flushed and disoriented.

“Think it's a good deal,” Traynor was saying. “The Harker buyout,” he clarified when Dominic didn't reply at once.

“Oh. Yes, yes. Yes, I do.” Which he supposed he did, based on what he'd read in the file yesterday. He sure as hell hadn't been able to focus on it this morning.

“So we should go ahead?” Traynor got to his feet.

“What? Oh, yes, I suppose we should.” Dominic checked his watch, still wondering if he would have time for Sierra before a one-thirty meeting.

“I'll get right on it then,” Traynor said happily.

“You do that,” Dominic said and reached for the phone.

She wasn't home. He supposed she might have gone to his place, but Lupe, his cleaning lady, said there was no one else there. Disgruntled, he called her agent.

“Of course I know where she is,” he said. “Right where she's supposed to be. At Gibson Walker's.”

“Until when?”

“Until they're finished, of course.”

Dominic ground his teeth. “How far ahead is she booked?” Then, hearing the answer, he said, “Unbook her.”

“What?”

“She's got other things to do.”

“What?”

“She's on her honeymoon,” Dominic said and banged down the phone.

He was in Gibson Walker's reception room, when she came out of the studio that evening. Toby Hart, one of the models, had his arm looped over her shoulder and was feeding her one of his ritual lines of bull when she spied Dominic across the room.

He was tapping his foot and glancing at his watch and glaring in annoyance at Edith, Gib's office manager, who stood guarding the inner door with the ferocity of a pit bull.

Sierra smiled. "Hey. Hi!"

"Who's that?" Toby asked.

"My, um, husband?" It wasn't supposed to sound like a question, but somehow it did.

Toby hooted. "A husband? Our Sierra has a husband?" He started to laugh.

Dominic stepped up and with deceptive casualness removed Toby's arm from her shoulders and replaced it with his own. His fingers felt like steel as they curved into her upper arm. "She has a husband," he said with steely smoothness.

Toby grinned, still thinking it was a joke.

Then, "You're late," Dominic growled.

Sierra blinked. "For what?"

"This."

Before she realized what was happening, his lips were on hers. It was a humdinger of a kiss. Fierce, passionate, possessive.

It said, "She's mine," in no uncertain terms. And Sierra, eyes flickering open for an instant, saw that Toby had received the message. As had Edith and Gibson, and Charlee and Cara and Dave, the other models, Sebastian, the ad agency rep, and Lisa, the makeup artist. They stood in a clump in the studio doorway, jaws sagging, as Dominic staked his claim.

Fair enough, Sierra thought. If he could brand her as his, she could do the same to him.

So, shutting her eyes, she returned his kiss with all the fervor, passion and hunger that had been growing inside her all day. She looped her arms around his neck and plastered her body against his—and felt an instant response.

His possessiveness became desire. His passion became hunger. And hers was equal to it. What had started out as a simple branding fire had

turned into a full-fledged conflagration. And when they finally pulled apart, it was to stare at each other in wide-eyed astonishment.

“Wow,” Toby said, which just about summed it up as far as Sierra was concerned.

Dominic exhaled sharply and grabbed her hand. “We’re going home,” he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

IF SHE'D had to guess what Dominic's apartment would look like, she'd have imagined acres of polished teak, furniture of chrome and leather and steel, white walls and the perfectly positioned piece of abstract art.

She would have missed by a mile.

His apartment, she knew, was in an elegant pre-war Fifth Avenue building. They were greeted by a doorman who said, "Good evening, Mr. Wolfe," and whose eyes widened only momentarily at his purple-haired companion. They crossed a spacious marble-tiled lobby and walked beneath crystal chandeliers. They rode up five floors in an elevator with exquisite inlaid wood paneling on every wall. They stepped into a graciously appointed vestibule with carpet so thick Sierra felt as if they were standing on a cloud. There were only four doors besides the elevator on the floor. Dominic opened the one facing Fifth and stood back to let her enter first.

Her breath caught in her throat. "You live in a tree house!"

Dominic laughed. "Yeah. More or less." He sounded somewhere between boyish and sheepish and he seemed to be watching her closely.

She couldn't contain her delight at the apartment with its nearly floor-to-ceiling windows that looked right out over the treetops of Central Park. The living room walls weren't white at all, but the soft blue of a spring sky, and the paintings on them were not abstract either. There were several, all almost primitive representational pieces.

The largest was one of a large cottage by a broad sand beach that reminded Sierra of Dominic's house out on Long Island where she had given Mariah a baby shower. Two more were various aspects of a low-slung peach-colored house with white shuttered French doors. The house was set amongst almost jungly foliage and overlooking a tropical turquoise sea. Two more were beach scenes with children playing in the surf. Sierra didn't know the artist, but she felt an immediate kinship.

"This is your house!" She indicated the painting of the cottage. "How did you get an artist to come and paint your house?"

"My mother painted them all when I was a kid. She wasn't really an artist." There was both pride and defensiveness in his voice.

“She certainly was,” Sierra said warmly. “They’re all wonderful. I don’t know about the others, of course. But she’s really captured the spirit of your house.”

In fact she could almost feel the love of the Wolfe family home emanating from the painting. It was a feeling she remembered associating with the house the only time she’d visited it. At the time it had seemed odd. Not the sort of feelings she’d ever have expected to get from anything connected to high-powered, hard-edged Dominic Wolfe.

It was, perhaps, one of the things that had made her think there might be more to him than she’d guessed. She remembered she’d come home from the shower even more curious and aware of him than ever.

“Where were the others done?” she asked.

Dominic’s expression grew shuttered. “Our family place in the Bahamas.”

“It’s gorgeous. I love the Bahamas. I’ve been there on photo shoots. You must go there every chance you get.”

“Not anymore.” He turned away and she felt as if a wall had crashed down between them.

Too late she remembered Mariah telling her that a long time ago he’d been going to get married in the Bahamas and something had happened. She hadn’t been listening then. She’d been telling herself she didn’t want to know anything about Dominic Wolfe. Now she wished she’d paid more attention. Clearly it was still a sore point.

“Well, it’s nice to have it because it’s your mother’s work,” she said after a moment. “And you must enjoy remembering that.”

He turned back from staring out the window and his smile was only a little strained. “Yeah, I guess.”

“So,” she said brightly. “Show me the rest.”

He showed her a state-of-the-art kitchen, a dining area that was comfortable rather than grand. Then he led her into behind the kitchen to what had once been servants’ quarters. One room he had turned into a den with a comfortable sofa, stereo, television and pool table. The other was, he said, “The gear room.”

Sports gear, he meant. There was a bin full of soccer balls, footballs, basketballs and baseballs. The walls were lined with racks containing fishing rods, tennis racquets, baseball bats, hockey and lacrosse sticks—all looking well used. There was a serious-looking backpack hanging from a

hook on the wall, and beneath it was a row of cleats, skates, both ice and in-line, tennis shoes and hiking boots.

She remembered a profusion of sports gear at the house on Long Island, too, now that she thought about it. But she'd assumed it was left over from childhood or from his brothers, Rhys and Nathan. She'd never imagined Dominic would take time for it.

"You can put your gear in here, too," he said. "Or you can leave it with your stuff upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Sierra echoed as he flipped off the light and led the way back to the living room.

"Mmm. I had it moved." He picked up her tackle box of styling tools and started up the spiral staircase.

It reminded her of Frankie and she knew he would love it. He would love the whole apartment. It looked like it had been designed by a nine-year-old boy. But she barely stopped to think about that now.

She was trying to bend her mind around the "I had it moved" bit.

"I didn't know where you'd want things," Dominic was saying as he led the way up the stairs, "so I just told them for now to put everything in here."

He went into the room directly across from the stairs and flipped another switch. As light spilled into the room, Sierra stopped dead.

It was as if her apartment had been recreated right here. Her futon with its faded striped madras bedspread was against one wall. Against the other was her fish tank, complete with Buster and Gomer.

"Hi, guys," she said in an oddly breathless voice to the imperturbable goldfish swimming around just as if they'd always been here.

Her own bookcase, hand-painted blue, complete with clouds, and filled with her most loved books, was tucked next to the fish tank. She spied her tiny television, her portable stereo. Everything. Even the rather rickety old oak table that she loved—the one that had been in her grandparents' house when she was a child—the one that everyone else she knew was always threatening to throw out.

Dominic hadn't had it thrown out.

He set her tackle box full of makeup gear on it now. "Okay?"

Sierra was still walking around touching it all, wondering at it, awed that, with one wave of Dominic's checkbook her whole life seemed to have moved uptown.

“Did they forget anything?” he asked. “They said they left the stove and refrigerator there, but that your neighbor said they stayed with the apartment.”

“They do,” Sierra said absently. Then she realized what he’d said. “They asked *Pam*?”

Dominic shrugged. “They asked a neighbor. Someone who came to see what was going on.”

“Pam,” Sierra said. She’d seen Pam at lunch and her friend hadn’t said anything about it. She must have been amazed that Sierra hadn’t said anything either. “When did they do all this?”

“This afternoon.”

How could they have done it so fast?

As if he’d read her mind, Dominic said, “It didn’t take long. There wasn’t that much. You can go through it and decide what you want to keep. I told them to bring everything that was yours.”

And they’d set it up exactly as it had been in her apartment. Amazing.

Sierra grinned. “So we can come in here anytime and recreate our wedding night?”

He actually blushed, and the heat of the kiss they’d exchanged at Gibson’s—which had been burning gently but persistently ever since—flamed suddenly once more to life.

Dominic grabbed her hand and towed her to the door. “Not on your life, sweetheart,” he said. “I have a lot bigger bed right this way.”

His bedroom was vast. Simple. Almost, but not quite, stark. Unlike the other rooms in his apartment, it had a thick plush carpet on the floor. She could feel her boots sinking into the pile as she stood and stared at the bed.

It was approximately twice the size of her whole apartment. With its hunter-green duvet, it didn’t look so much like a bed as a playing field.

And that thought made *her* blush. It sat against the far wall on a raised black lacquer platform. And against the matching black lacquer headboard was a scattering of pillows in toning colors. For an instant Sierra’s gaze flickered upward, just to be sure there were no mirrors on the ceiling.

Dominic caught the movement and grinned. “Wishing?”

“No!” She blushed hotly again.

“I always thought it was tacky. But there might be times...” His voice trailed off suggestively, speculatively, and their gazes locked together so

fiercely it seemed to Sierra they were almost welded by the heat of the exchange.

After a long moment she cleared her throat. “There might be times,” she agreed.

His eyes widened for an instant, and the color in his cheeks deepened. He hesitated just for a second, then he took both her hands in his and drew her close. “I imagine we can manage without.”

He knew he shouldn’t be so eager.

They hadn’t even had dinner yet. And it wasn’t like he was going to have to take her home, for God’s sake!

She *was* home. In *his* home. Permanently.

But telling himself so made no difference.

He tried to think, to be rational, but he couldn’t. It was impossible to think when he had Sierra Kelly—*Wolfe!*—in his bedroom.

There would be plenty of time to be rational—and have dinner—later.

He slid his hands up her arms, then down her back. Then he hooked his fingers under her tube top and peeled it over her head. Her bare breasts brushed against his chest.

He swallowed hard. Then he bent his head and kissed first one and then the other, felt her shiver beneath the cool wet touch of his tongue, and laughed softly.

Her fingers clutched at his hair. “You think you’re so hot,” she said gruffly, that smoky edge of desire in her voice sending him closer than ever to the edge.

“Mmm,” he said and made the sound vibrate against her breast. “Real hot.”

Sierra’s fingernails dug into his scalp. “Brave man.”

He nuzzled her. “You bet.” Then he set to work on the leather jeans she was wearing. They were harder to dispose of than her skirts. His fingers felt like thumbs. He fiddled, he wrestled, he groaned.

Sierra grinned. “Thought you might like a bit of challenge.”

He steered her back to the bed and toppled her onto it. “I love a challenge.” He straddled her and, tongue caught between his teeth, eyes narrowed in concentration, at last he got the button undone and the zip tugged down. Peeling them off was another challenge. They hugged her

long legs like a second skin. But finally he smoothed them off and stepped back.

She lay bare before him—but for the merest scrap of lace.

Sierra ran her tongue over her lips and the sight made his hormones jump, made his clothes feel too tight. He tugged at his tie.

“No!” Sierra sat up. “Mine.” And she scrambled forward, then knelt on the bed, slid her hands up his shirtfront and unknotted his tie. Then, one by one, she popped open the buttons on his shirt and peeled it slowly away from his chest and down his arms. She was so close that he could feel her breath stirring the hair on his chest. It made him shudder. She smiled and tossed his shirt aside.

“Very nice,” she said, her voice a throaty purr. And then her hands were on him again, rubbing up across the crisp hair of his chest, the smooth skin of his shoulders and down his arms. Their fingers locked together, clenched.

And then their lips touched.

That kiss at the studio had been a first course. An appetizer. Heady and passionate, hot and zingy, but insubstantial. This one rocked him back on his heels.

She tasted so good. Ripe and full and warm, as if it wasn’t just her mouth kissing him but her whole being, body and soul. She kissed him the way no other woman ever had—as if just doing that was the most important thing in the world, as if she wanted only that—only him.

Her kisses were long and hot, then quick and short. They were nips and nibbles, tastes and teases. She kissed him on the mouth, on the jaw, on the neck, on the chest. She loosed his hands to knot her fingers in his hair. And he kissed his way down across her chin and her neck. He pressed light kisses once more along the slope of her breasts, then laved her heated skin with his tongue.

“*Wolfe!*”

“What?”

She wrapped her arms around him and they tumbled together onto the bed. Their bodies tangled, wrestled, squirmed. Her fingers went to his belt and made quick work of it. He let her because he wanted her fingers on him. He yanked off her panties, then held still above her, as she lowered his zipper, knowing she would soon be touching him, flesh to flesh, where he needed her most.

But not yet. Not yet. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Slow, he told himself. Go slow.

Then her fingers were at his waist and she hooked her fingers inside his waistband and in one tug, slid both his trousers and his boxers right down to his knees.

“Ah, look what I found,” Sierra said softly. Her fingers found him, wrapped him.

He shuddered at her touch. It was exquisite, mind-blowing. He clenched his toes, his fingers, every muscle he owned. He held himself absolutely rigid and prayed to keep his control.

“Si-eeeeerr-ah!” Her name whistled through his gritted teeth.

“Yes, Wolfe?” Her fingers rubbed him lightly.

He swallowed hard. Trembled. Quivered. “Don’t. Stop.”

His breath came in quick, harsh gasps. And as much as he wanted to go slow, to draw it out, to make her as crazy as she made him, he knew it wasn’t going to happen this time.

But he would, he vowed. Later. *Later!*

God!

“Don’t?” She smiled against his chest. “Stop? Or, don’t stop?”

Her fingers were stroking him, making his body break out in a sweat. Then she followed her fingers with her tongue, licking him, and he was almost gone.

Desperate, he parted her thighs, sought the slick hot center of her, and plunged in, thanking heaven she was as ready as he was.

If she hadn’t been, he’d have hurt her or made a fool of himself.

But she was, and she embraced him. “Ah, Wolfe,” she whispered, her breath hot against his cheek as she shifted, settling him in.

Dominic’s eyes squeezed shut against the overpowering sensation and clung desperately to the last shreds of control. He didn’t move. Couldn’t. Not yet.

Not if he wanted it to be good for her, too. Not if he wanted to shatter her the way she could so easily shatter him.

He took a careful breath and held it. Held it. Held it.

Sierra went still, too. Silent. Her body wriggled. He bit his lip. Hung on. A finger touched the small of his back. “Wolfe?”

“What?” He said the word without moving, without breathing.

Muffled laugh. “You are still alive. I thought you were dead!”

“Dead!” He reared up, outraged.

But Sierra held him fast. She wrapped her arms around him, giggling, as she wriggled beneath him, then pressing her heels against the backs of his thighs, urging him closer, seating even him deeper inside her.

And that was all it took.

That small movement. That slight friction—and he was a goner. He surged against her, once, twice—and came with a shuddering, shattering climax that left him weak and wrung out and feeling like a fumbling teenager instead of a thirty-six-year-old man.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Sorry.”

He tried to pull away, to come to grips. But Sierra hung on. She kissed his sweat-slick shoulders. She caressed the damp skin of his back. Her fingers kneaded his buttocks. And Dominic felt small shudders course through him at the same time they seemed to ripple through her.

Was she?

Her fingers clenched. Her nails dug into his butt. Her heels pressed hard against the backs of his thighs.

Had she?

Lord, what kind of moron was he that he couldn’t tell? Didn’t know?

“Ahhhhh,” she breathed. “Yessssss.” And then she gave a long sigh and her fingers relaxed. She rubbed her foot down his leg, then nuzzled his neck. Her body seemed to settle and soften beneath him. And then he realized that the weight of his body was resting on hers and quickly he rolled away.

This time Sierra let him go. But not far. Just far enough so that she could turn onto her side and snuggle into him. He felt her lips graze one of his nipples and his hand came up involuntarily and stroked her hair.

“Dominic?”

That surprised him as she rarely called him anything but Wolfe. His hand stilled. “What?” he asked warily.

Her eyes were still closed, but he felt her smile against his chest. “That was very nice.”

Nice!? As a lover he was “nice”?

Actually he supposed he was lucky she thought that highly of him. He certainly hadn’t taken much trouble seeing that her needs were met.

“It will be better,” he muttered.

“No.” She shook her head slightly. “Couldn’t be.” She kissed him.

And then she slept.

Dominic didn't sleep.

He lay there and stared at the ceiling, trying to sort things out.

This was the later during which he was supposed to be fixing dinner and going over the papers he needed to look at before morning. But Sierra was asleep in his arms and he didn't want to disturb her.

That was why he didn't move. It had nothing to do with how much he liked just lying there holding her. It had nothing to do with how much he wanted Sierra still.

He didn't like that he wanted Sierra.

Sex was one thing. But just lying here holding her was something else. That felt...committed.

Dominic wasn't about to get committed.

Not in his heart.

He'd be faithful. It was just good sense to be faithful. It was fair. Dominic believed in being fair. He had no intention of looking at any other women. He had no desire at all to sleep around. Even if he should ever feel such a desire he wouldn't do it. Because he'd made a vow.

He believed in vows.

What he didn't believe in was letting anyone into his heart.

He wasn't letting Sierra into his heart.

Even thinking about such a thing annoyed him. He wasn't used to even considering the possibility. He wasn't used to wanting one this much. And he wasn't used to having mixed emotions about it.

He wasn't really used to emotions at all.

After the disaster with Carin, he'd built a good strong wall between himself and the women in his life. He played with them, but he never let them matter. He never fell in love.

And he still hadn't, he assured himself.

Of course he hadn't. Imagine being in love with a purple-haired cosmetologist!

Sierra was his wife, yes. But that was for expediency's sake. He'd wanted to spike his father's guns once and for all, and she had been the perfect woman to do it with.

She was wild, crazy, exactly wrong for him.

And they had great sex.

What could be better?

Outside the sound of sirens headed up Madison Avenue. Sierra snuggled closer and instinctively Dominic's arm tightened around her. Then deliberately, determinedly, he loosened it. She didn't need his protection. Hell, half the time he needed protecting from her!

The sirens receded and, in the silence, he could hear the soft sound of Sierra's breathing. It ruffled the hairs on his chest. Her soft hair brushed his chin and tickled his lips. He held himself still, resisting the impulse to kiss the top of her head.

They were still having great sex, he reminded himself. Tonight they'd had great sex. He wrapped a strand of purple hair around his fingers. It had been fun. Exhilarating. And he didn't even have to grab a taxi and go home afterward.

It was more efficient.

Yes, Dominic decided, pleased with that notion. It was efficient to have married Sierra. Efficient. That's what it was.

Sierra awoke slowly, relishing the end of a lovely dream and snuggling in the soft fine cotton of the sheets. She stretched drowsily, opened her eyes and realized where she was.

Immediately she looked around for Dominic. He wasn't there. She frowned, then glanced toward the bathroom, expecting to see the door closed and hear the shower running. But the door was open and the bathroom was empty. Bright morning sunlight was peeping through the drapes.

Sierra rolled over—and jerked wide awake. It was seven forty-five!

Her alarm clock hadn't gone off!

She scrambled out of bed. Why hadn't he awakened her? Had she forgotten to set her clock? She grabbed it off the table and checked it. Yes, apparently she had. God!

It was what Dominic did to her. He could make her forget her brain if it were trapped inside her head.

She hurried to the bathroom and flicked on the shower. While she waited for the water to warm up, she brushed her teeth. Once she'd done it, she realized that she hadn't needed to wait. In Dominic's apartment, unlike

her old one, hot water was plentiful and immediate. She jumped in and just wished she had time to enjoy it.

Sometime she would, she vowed. Maybe tonight. Maybe tonight she would take a long leisurely shower—and not alone. She soaped her body quickly and imagined slicking that wonderful spicy smelling soap over the lean hard planes of Dominic's body. She imagined making him shudder and moan.

Sierra had a good imagination. Way too good. So she flicked the water to cold, yelped and shivered. Then, ardor quenched, she shut it off and jumped out of the shower.

Later, she promised herself. Tonight.

Quickly she towed her hair dry, wrapped herself in Dominic's plush robe that hung on the door, then went to fix herself some breakfast. Ordinarily, being late, she might have skipped it. But this morning she was ravenous.

They hadn't eaten last night—not food anyway. They'd been far too intent on each other to venture into the kitchen. So now she made oatmeal, fried bacon, and while it was cooking, ate a slice of cantaloupe. There was coffee still hot in the coffeemaker. She blessed Dominic and gulped a cup. Then she poured herself another and carrying it, hurried back upstairs to dress. She had to be at Finn MacCauley's studio a little before nine and now that she was living uptown, she'd have to allow a little more time.

There was no time to do anything clever with her hair, so she arranged it in a casual tousled style, then went into the bedroom where her things were and opened the closet.

Her clothes weren't there!

None of them. She whipped open the dresser. At least she still had underwear. She grabbed a bra and a pair of panties, then stared once more at the empty closet.

Had Dominic had them throw everything out?

She knew, though he'd never said anything, that he thought some of her clothing was a little over-the-top. But had he married her and then ditched it all?

Incensed, fuming, Sierra stalked back into his bedroom, yanked open the walk-in closet door, ready to do the same to his Brooks Brothers' pinstripes and his long-sleeved dress shirts—and discovered that all her clothes had been hung in there.

Next to a dozen dark conservative suits and jackets and trousers were her denim miniskirts and Day-Glo tube tops. Next to his long-sleeved button-down shirts were her halter tops and camisoles. And there, at the end of a row on the floor, alongside his wing tips and deck shoes were her strappy sandals and clunky boots.

She laughed—and felt oddly, immeasurably lighter.

At least they weren't only sharing sex, they were sharing a closet, too.

She picked out a top, then changed her mind and plucked one of Dominic's shirts off the hanger instead. She slipped it on and flapped the sleeves, then rolled them up to her elbows. It was far too broad in the shoulders and the shirt-tails hit her just inches above her knees. But buttoned, it covered more of her than Sierra normally covered—even if she left the top two buttons open. Besides, wearing it made her feel closer to Dominic. If she rubbed her cheek against the collar she could smell that same clean laundry starch smell she smelled whenever she pressed her face against his chest.

She was going to share his shirt as well. It made her feel good.

She shimmied into a pair of purple leggings, then stuffed her feet into her boots, and cinched her waist with a hot pink belt. Stepping back, she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the door.

The new improved Sierra Kelly *Wolfe* stared back at her.

Her lips twitched into a smile, then a full-fledged grin. She felt wonderful. Giving herself a thumbs up and one more saucy grin, Sierra headed off to work.

“What do you mean, you got someone else?” She stared at Strong, Finn's office manager, her jaw sagging. It was ten minutes to nine. She'd taken the downtown subway and had run the last three blocks. She wasn't late. But Strong had looked astonished to see her and had said Lisa was coming in.

“Why would you get someone else?”

“Because Bruce called and said you were booked out.”

“What? Why would he say a thing like that?” Sierra thumped her tackle box down. “Give me the phone.”

Furiously she punched in her agent's number. “Bruce! It's Sierra. What are you doing? Why did you tell Finn I wasn't going to be here?”

“Because you booked out, sweetheart.”

"I did no such thing!"

"Well, not you personally," Bruce said. "But your husband—"

"What? *Dominic* called you?"

"You betcha, sweetheart. Said you were going on your honeymoon."

Sierra stood speechless. Finally she managed, "Honeymoon?"

The word stopped her dead. Dominic had called Bruce? Dominic had booked her out? Dominic had said they were going on a honeymoon?

Then why hadn't Dominic told her?

"What *exactly* did my, um, husband say?"

"Just that. He called yesterday morning, looking for you. He seemed to think you had already booked out. But I told him you were working, and he asked how far ahead you were scheduled and then he said to unbook you. You didn't want me to?"

A part of Sierra wanted to tear Bruce's head off. A part of her wanted to tear off Dominic's.

How dare he just call up and cancel her jobs?

But another part of her—the closet romantic part—couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Because he was taking her on a honeymoon.

They would have more than sex and a closet and a shirt shared between them. They would have a real start to their marriage. Time for each other.

For sex, of course.

But for more than that. For getting to know each other. For learning to love each other.

"Oh," she said and sucked in a deep breath, then let it out a little shakily. "No. That's all right. You did...fine. Thanks."

"So you're out, right?" Bruce said, apparently wanting it from the horse's mouth this time.

"I'm out."

"Till when?"

"I'll let you know," she promised, starting to smile, happiness welling up inside her.

As soon as she'd discussed it with Dominic.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE went back to the apartment and called Pam. “You and Frankie have to come visit.”

“Sierra?” Pam squeaked. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear from you. I was so worried when those movers came. It was so sudden. Of course I should have realized you’d move. I just didn’t think—”

“Neither did I,” Sierra said cheerfully. “But that’s Dominic. He snaps his fingers, the world moves. Or at least I did. You won’t believe this place. You’ve got to see it. Frankie has to see it. Get a cab and come up.” She rattled off the address.

“Oh, we can’t intrude!” Pammie objected.

“You’re not intruding. You’re sharing the experience. Besides, you didn’t think that moving uptown would get me out of your life, did you? Come on. Grab a taxi and come. I’ll pay for it. We’ll have a picnic.”

“Frankie can’t—”

“Inside,” Sierra assured her. “Frankie will love it. Trust me.”

“But—”

“Pammie,” Sierra said sternly. “Don’t abandon me.” It was underhanded and she knew it, playing on Pam’s beholdenness. But it worked.

Pam gave in. “We’ll take the bus.”

Sierra would have disputed that, but she knew her friend already considered herself beholden for half a million dollars. Pammie would be determined not to add cab fare on top of it.

“I’ll see you in an hour,” Sierra said.

Dominic’s kitchen was as well-stocked as the average restaurant. Sierra had seen that when she was fixing herself breakfast. But she doubted Frankie would care, so she made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cut oranges in half, found a bag of “homemade” chocolate-chip cookies in the cupboard, and set everything out on her old madras bedspread in front of the windows in the living room.

“Wow!” Frankie crowed when they arrived. “We are havin’ a picnic! See, Mom?” His normally pale cheeks flushed with enthusiasm as he looked around the apartment, then beamed at his mother. His eyes were

alight with excitement. "This is great. It's like my tree house," he approved. "Way cool."

"Way cool," Pammie agreed and, looking around, too, actually laughed in delight. "This is amazing."

"Isn't it?" Sierra said. "Come on. Let's eat."

After they finished, she showed them the rest of the apartment. Frankie loved the staircase. He examined it carefully, as if committing it to memory so he could reproduce it on his own designs once he got home. He liked the view and craned his neck to see how far up and down the park he could see. But most of his enthusiasm he saved for "the gear room" and the den next to it. He handled the roller blades and the ice skates and the baseball bats and pounded his fist into Dominic's fielder's glove.

"Next year I'm gonna play baseball," he told his mother and Sierra.

"Yes," Pammie agreed.

"And I'm gonna ice skate this winter."

"Well..."

"I am," Frankie said fervently. "When I get my new kidney. I'm gettin' one," he told Sierra. "My doc said."

"Did he?"

Frankie nodded solemnly. "He said I'll be better'n new then. Didn't he?" He looked to his mother for confirmation.

Pam nodded. "Yes." She smiled at Sierra. "That's what he said."

Sierra wanted to hear more of what the doctor said, but she didn't think Frankie needed to be part of the whole discussion, so she poked through Dominic's collection of videotapes.

"*Raiders of the Lost Ark*?" She plucked one out, knowing it was one of Frankie's favorites. "Want to watch it on the big screen?" She nodded toward the TV.

Frankie looked at his mother beseechingly. "Can I, Mom?"

"I don't know if we can stay that long," Pam said.

"Let him start," Sierra said. "You can always come back and finish another time."

They left Frankie settled in watching Indiana Jones being chased by headhunters, and she and Pammie went back to the kitchen. Sierra poured them each a cup of tea.

"Tell me what the doctors said?"

“They said he’ll be better than new.” Pam smiled as she echoed what Frankie had said moments before. “Truly, Sierra. They said if they get a match, he’s a great candidate. And because of you, he’s on the list. They are going to be doing tissue samples so they will know when a match exists. They’re testing me, of course, and my sister. And they’ll test Frankie’s father if we find him. Not that I think we’re likely to. Or,” she added grimly, “that Dan would give one up if he knew.”

“Of course he would,” Sierra said. “Frankie’s his son!”

“As if that ever meant a thing to him.” Pam gave herself a little shake. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that out there somewhere there’s going to be a kidney. I’m sure of it. And Frankie will be well again.” She clasped her fingers together and looked heavenward. “Please, God.” Then she looked at Sierra, her expression concerned. “Are you really okay here? I mean, it’s gorgeous and all that. Almost homey, even. But that’s just the trappings. Is he...is he *good* to you? I couldn’t stand it if he wasn’t good to you.”

Sierra took Pam’s hands in hers, smiling. “Stop worrying. He’s good to me.”

“But can you make it work?” Pammie wanted to know. “Really? I know that you probably have—” she blushed “—great sex. But what about... about everything else? Dan and I had great sex,” she said grimly.

“No. It’s more than that,” Sierra assured her. “It started that way,” she admitted. “And it’s crazy, the two of us are so different. But...we’re going on a honeymoon.”

Pam’s eyes lit up and she squeezed Sierra’s hands. “You are?” she said eagerly. “When? Where?”

“I don’t know yet. He hasn’t said. But...he booked me out. That’s why I was off today.”

Pam’s eyes widened. “He called Bruce and didn’t even tell you?”

Sierra shook her head. “It’s like him. To do something like that spontaneously. In that way, I guess, we are alike.” She grinned. “He’ll tell me tonight. He’ll have to. Because he didn’t tell me this morning and I’m going to have to know. After all I went to work and found out I’d been replaced.”

“Whoa! Really?” Pam looked worried.

“Don’t,” Sierra said, before Pam’s natural instinct to think the worst could kick in. “You don’t know Wolfe. That’s the way he is. Peremptory.

Cocky. Determined.”

“Nothing like you.” Pam grinned.

Sierra laughed. “It’s why we strike sparks off each other, that’s for sure. He’ll tell me tonight.” She hugged her arms across her breasts happily.

And then Pam smiled, too. “I’m glad,” she said and gave Sierra a quick hug. “You deserve to be happy, Sierra. Nobody deserves it more.”

Dominic had thought yesterday was bad.

Today was a whole lot worse.

Yesterday he hadn’t been able to get Sierra out of his mind, but at least she’d been at work where he knew he couldn’t just walk in and grab her and haul her home to bed.

Today he knew she was home.

All day long. Or she would be once she got to Finn’s and realized she’d been taken off the books.

He probably should have told her last night, but he hadn’t remembered. He’d been much too intent on the Sierra right in front of him to think about tomorrow.

Then this morning, when he’d been tempted to wake her and indulge in making love to her one more time, he hadn’t because he knew making love with Sierra would not be quick. Once they got started, they would take their time. They would love each other deeply and intensely and furiously.

And that would be fine for her because she could stay there all day. But he had a meeting about the Harker take-over at eight.

So he’d left her asleep while he’d hauled himself out of bed.

Sierra hadn’t stirred. And when he came back after his shower, she’d still been sound asleep. Of course they’d barely slept all night, so she had a right to be tired. And she looked so sweet and peaceful and content that he couldn’t bear to wake her up just to tell her she could go back to sleep again.

So he’d reached over and shut off her alarm. There was no sense in her waking up and going in to work when she didn’t have to. She would doubtless call Finn’s when she woke up, and they could tell her they’d got someone else.

She might be annoyed at finding out that way, but Dominic was confident she’d see the sense in it when he explained.

He shot back his cuff and glanced at his watch. It was now three minutes later than the last time he'd looked at it.

He wanted to go home to Sierra. It was ten minutes after six. He could certainly leave now. Shyla had left twenty minutes ago. Most everyone else had gone before that.

"You aren't going to keep the bride waiting, are you?" Shyla had said when she'd stuck her head in to say good-night.

Dominic had looked up from the papers he had spread all over his desk. "Not for long," he'd assured her.

But he would have stayed to work if she hadn't been home waiting. And he wasn't going to disrupt his whole life for her. It would be letting her matter far too much, implying that he cared more than he did.

He had no intention of doing that.

"I'll head home shortly," he said. "There are things that I want to finish up first." He wasn't admitting he'd been aching to leave since lunchtime—or before.

So he made himself focus on the papers on his desk. He read all the specs on the Harker deal, and then he read them over again. He had a fine steel-trap mind and a reputation for attention to meticulous detail. He never went into a business deal unless he understood exactly what he was getting into. He wasn't afraid to take risks, but they were calculated to the nth degree.

Usually such detail consumed him. The more he learned, the more he wanted to learn.

Not tonight.

Tonight his mind kept wandering to Sierra. What had she done all day? Was she eager for him to come home? As eager as he was to be there?

Damn it!

He shoved her out of his head and made himself read the pages aloud. Made himself dwell on every single word. And every few minutes he checked his watch.

Finally at quarter to seven he decided he'd exercised his willpower long enough.

Neatly he put all the papers back into the folder. Then, lining it up with the edge he set it on the corner of his desk. He checked his e-mail one last time, recorded his thoughts for Kent in case his assistant checked his mail

tonight. Then, satisfied that he was once more in control of his life—and his libido—he locked up and made his way home.

She didn't fix peanut butter and jelly for Dominic.

Sierra wasn't a terrific cook, but under the circumstances, she wanted to do her best. So she called her sister Mariah and asked for help.

"What sort of help?" Mariah said warily. Sierra knew her sister loved her dearly, but they were not always on the same wavelength. And considering what she hadn't told Mariah, this was going to be a little tricky.

"I need a recipe or two," she said airily.

"Recipes? What kind? I thought you believed in takeout. Wasn't that your idea of the world's best cookbook? The one filled with phone numbers of take-away joints?"

"Most of the time it is," Sierra admitted. "But I want to do something a little special tonight."

"Who is he?"

Trust Mariah to get right to the point. And trust Mariah not to have heard. How could a woman who made her living interviewing people and doing stunningly perceptive personality pieces miss seeing who made her own sister's heart pound?

Of course that meant that Sierra had camouflaged her feelings incredibly well. She certainly hadn't wanted anyone to know she had a thing for Dominic Wolfe. Unrequited passion wasn't something she had any desire to admit to.

Now she was wishing she'd been a little more transparent.

"It's Dominic," she said.

"Dominic who?" Mariah asked.

Jeez. "Dominic! Your brother-in-law."

"*What!* No! You're joking! Sierra, that's not even funny. You and Dominic? God, Rhys would bust a gut laughing. Who is it really? I mean, I'm glad you've finally found someone who can keep you interested for more than a week and a half. But..." Her sister's voice trailed off when Sierra didn't say anything.

The silence grew. And grew. And grew.

"You aren't joking." The words fell like stones into still water. Mariah sighed heavily. "Oh, for God's sake, Sierra. He's handsome and clever and

smarter than Einstein. But he's made of granite. He's all business—24/7. He probably sleeps in his suit and tie.”

“He doesn't.”

“He never— What did you say?”

“I said, he doesn't sleep in his suit. The tie is—” Sierra giggled “—optional.”

“Oh. My. God.” There was a long silence. “Can I just tell you to cut your losses?” Mariah said. “Can I tell you to get out while the getting is good, before you get serious? Because, believe me, sweetie, Dominic is not going to get serious. He's not going to get involved. He's a 100% confirmed bachelor.”

“He married me on Tuesday.”

She knew she shouldn't just blurt it out like that. She knew she should pussyfoot around, come at it obliquely, maybe try to soften the news a little, prepare her sister. She knew Mariah wasn't keen on surprises.

But it was four o'clock. Dominic would be home in less than two hours. And she wanted to make him dinner—a nice dinner—to celebrate their marriage—and the surprise honeymoon.

She didn't have a lot of time.

“I'm sorry. I must have heard you wrong. I thought you said he *married* you?” Mariah sounded oddly breathless.

“You heard right. We got married. On Tuesday afternoon,” Sierra thought that grounding it down to a day might help.

“On Tuesday afternoon. Just like that. *You don't even know each other! You don't even like each other! You threatened him with his tie when you busted into his...*” Once more Mariah's words died. There was a bit more silence, then a slightly thready, just a little bit hysterical laugh. “And that's when it began, huh?”

“Not really,” Sierra said quickly. “We really stayed well away from each other after that. I mean, he thought I was really going to rip off his family jewels. He wasn't exactly enamored. But he was...”

“Curious?”

“I guess you could say that. And, well, so was I. We ran into each other a few times. At your shower. And then at the hospital after Steve and Lizzie were born. We were just sort of...aware. But nothing happened—until your wedding. We had a little too much champagne at the wedding. And we were

on our own after the reception. We had to go back to Kansas City to catch a flight out in the morning and—”

“I get the picture,” Mariah said. There was a pause. Then she said, “Why didn’t you say anything? If you’ve been seeing him—”

“I haven’t been! It was, like, a one-night-get-it-out-of-our-system event. But it didn’t,” Sierra said. “I hadn’t seen him since.”

“Until Tuesday,” Mariah said dryly.

“Until Tuesday,” Sierra agreed. “And he showed up at Finn’s studio and asked me to marry him.”

“Why?” Then, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry.” Mariah backed off at once. “I didn’t mean that. But—wait a minute. Maybe I did. Three months? Sierra, are you—?”

“No! I am damned well not! You’re the one who got pregnant, ‘Riah,” Sierra said sharply. “Not me.”

“Right,” Mariah said. “Right.” This last was a sigh. “You love him.”

Sierra wet her lips and took a breath. “Yes.”

Mariah didn’t say anything for a moment. She was clearly trying to rethink everything she knew about her conservative, businesslike brother-in-law—and her purple-haired impulsive sister.

“Does he love you?” she asked finally, apparently having decided that given everything else she had misjudged, that might be possible, too.

“No,” Sierra admitted. “He doesn’t. He married me because we’re dynamite in bed together. And because—” she sucked in a breath and plunged on, making a full breast of it, “because Douglas kept shoving suitable women down his throat.”

“Oh, surely not!” Mariah protested at once.

“He was,” Sierra insisted. “Every few weeks he’d have another candidate for Dominic to look over. All marvelous, eminently suitable women. Not like me.”

“But that can’t be why he married you,” Mariah countered. “He couldn’t be so dumb.”

“Thank you very much!”

“I don’t mean that you’re unsuitable, but that he wouldn’t marry just to spike Douglas’s guns!”

“Yes,” Sierra said. “He would. He did.”

“But—”

“And now we have to make something of it. Something that will work. That will last. I want it to last, ‘Riah,” Sierra said urgently.

“What does Dominic want?”

“I think he wants it to last, too. He booked me out today. I went to Finn’s and I’d been replaced.”

“What?” Mariah was somewhere between outrage and astonishment.

“I was furious at first, too,” Sierra said, “but then I talked to Bruce. Dominic had called yesterday and booked me out—so we could go on a honeymoon!”

Her sister was silent for a moment. Regrouping. Sorting things out. Thinking. That was Mariah, all over. Steady. Dependable. Insightful.

“So he must want it to work, too,” Sierra went on. “Don’t you think?”

She didn’t realize how badly she wanted Mariah to agree until she asked. It was, she realized, why she’d called her sister in the first place. The recipes had been the excuse, the catalyst that would allow her to tell her sister news she should have told her as soon as it had happened.

But she’d been afraid to then.

She’d been afraid that Mariah would tell her she was an idiot, that there was no way on earth Dominic and she could ever make a successful marriage, that impulsive trips to the city hall, based on no more than lust and a desire to annoy someone else, were destined for divorce court before the month was out.

And she’d had no reason to believe that Mariah would have been wrong.

But now they were going on a honeymoon.

Now it was more than lust and irritation at his father. He was taking time for her. He wanted to be with her, to get to know her. Perhaps to learn to love her.

“Don’t you think?” she repeated.

“It’s a start,” Mariah said. “Yeah, it’s a start.”

She gave Sierra a couple of good family recipes that she said any idiot could manage. “Do the lasagne,” she said. “Rhys loves lasagne. Dominic will, too. Fix a salad. Make garlic bread. Easy. The least of your worries,” she said with considerable accuracy. Then she wished Sierra luck.

“Thanks.”

“If you need anything—ever—you let me know,” Mariah said, her protective big sister determination showing its face. “Rhys will kick his butt

for you anytime you want.”

Sierra forbore saying that she thought Dominic was a match for his youngest brother.

Even though Rhys was a fireman and worked hard at a physical job much of the time, Sierra had seen enough of Dominic recently to know he had muscles. Plenty of muscles.

And she didn’t think he would suffer much interference in his life.

“We’ll be fine,” she said. “I hope.”

“I hope so, too, kid,” Mariah said. “Good luck.”

Sierra went shopping for the few things she needed that Dominic didn’t have. Then she lugged all the grocery bags home. The doorman had apparently accepted her right to be there for he helped her get them into the elevator.

“You know,” he said, “you can have them delivered.”

“Really?” It was amazing the things she had no idea about. “Thanks.”

She boiled the noodles, browned the meat and grated the cheese. Then she put the lasagne together, made a salad of mixed greens, mushrooms, red onion, black olives and Parmesan-flavored croutons, and made a garlic butter paste for the loaf of fresh bakery French bread she’d bought.

She set the table in the dining el where they could sit and eat, looking out over the park. It was considerably more civilized than the picnic she’d made for Frankie and Pam earlier that day, but it still felt very warm and cozy and tree-house-like. She put wineglasses on the table, dimmed the light slightly, then lit candles instead and shut the light off.

“Yes,” she said. It was perfect. Romance in a tree house.

And she would make sure they ate before they adjourned to the bedroom.

Where were they going on their honeymoon? she wondered. Jamaica? Italy? Greece? Cancún?

She had known people who’d gone to all those places. Probably Dominic knew somewhere even better.

She wished he had told her. But then she didn’t blame him for keeping it a surprise. The anticipation was lovely.

Even lovelier was the realization that he cared enough to want a honeymoon with her—that he, too, wanted their marriage to work.

It was six-fifteen. She thought he would be home any minute. She put the lasagne in to bake and opened the wine to let it breathe. She checked his stereo system and discovered that if she put on music in the den, the speakers were rigged so that she could hear it in any room in the house. She put on some soft romantic stuff, hoping that it wasn't music Dominic associated with seducing another woman.

And then she waited for him to walk in the door.

She waited. And waited.

She checked the lasagne. She checked the bread. She fiddled with the salad. She sipped the wine.

Six-thirty became six forty-five. Six forty-five became seven. Then it was seven-fifteen. Finally at almost seven-thirty, the front door opened.

Sierra smoothed damp palms down the sides of Dominic's shirt which she still wore. She'd hadn't felt nervous in years. She'd felt less apprehensive when she'd married him!

But that had just been an impulse.

Now they were getting down to what really mattered.

He wants this to work, too, she reminded herself. Then she drew a deep breath and went to greet her husband.

Something smelled good. Better than good.

Delicious.

As Dominic let himself into the apartment, his stomach growled in anticipation, and his whole being responded with surprise.

He'd assumed Sierra would be there waiting for him. But he'd expected a few threats and not a little annoyance as his reward for having booked her out of work.

In fact, he'd been anticipating the pleasure of charming her out of her irritation. All the way home—all day, for that matter—he'd been looking forward to it. He fully expected to lose his tie and to feel her fingers digging into his ribs. And he'd imagined catching her hands in his hand holding them over her head while he kissed her senseless. He would be rewarded with a deep flush on her cheeks and a hungry look in her eyes—and all would be forgiven and forgotten as he bore her off to bed.

But if he had to eat a delicious home-cooked meal instead, he supposed philosophically, he could probably manage that. Still, he was a little

surprised she wasn't upset.

Maybe she was. He hadn't seen her yet.

"Sier—" Her name dried up on his tongue as she sashayed out of the kitchen.

"Hi!" She gave him a cheery smile and a quick kiss before dancing away toward the dining area.

No complaints? No arguments? No need to charm her into a different mood?

Heck. But then, who cared?

She looked good enough to eat.

She was wearing one of his long-sleeved dress shirts, cinched at the waist with a belt. Dominic had never considered his shirts sexy in the slightest. But he'd never seen one on Sierra before!

Her legs were bare and her knees and several inches of tanned thigh were visible below the tails of his shirt. Even more smooth thigh flashed into view when she turned and he glimpsed the sides where the tails curved upward.

"Hi," he managed. It sounded like a frog's croak.

Enough buttons were undone at the neck and below that she didn't appear to be wearing a bra.

What else wasn't she wearing?

"You didn't tell me you'd called Bruce."

It was what he expected her to say, but her tone wasn't accusing. There seemed to be a soft, wondering, appreciative note in it.

He shrugged. "Well, it's not like I can't afford to support you."

"I know, but I didn't expect it. I'm so glad."

She was? Would wonders never cease? He reached for her, assuring himself that it was okay to do so now. He'd waited all day, after all.

They kissed. It was a long kiss. Eager on both their parts. Deep and hungry. It should have led straight to the bedroom.

But Sierra backed off. "First we eat. Food." She smiled at him. "I got my mother's recipe for lasagne. Mariah gave it to me."

Dominic did his best to tamp down his desire. "Right," he said. "Food."

"I hope you're hungry." She was looking at him hopefully, her expression open and eager.

"Sure," he said. "Even for food."

She laughed as if he'd made a wonderful joke. "Good. Go wash up, then come and sit. It's ready."

He was tempted to suggest they make a quick trip up to the bedroom first. But he didn't. She'd obviously worked hard to make dinner special. The least he could do was enjoy it. Any other time, he was sure he would. It was just that he'd been waiting all day to go to bed with her.

He dried his hands and went back to the dining room. She was serving the meal on his seldom-used dining table in front of the windows overlooking the park. She'd lit candles—tapers on the sideboard and at either side of the table. She'd put their plates directly across from each other. It looked cosy, intimate. A love nest.

Dominic felt edgy, wary, then chided himself. What was he wary of? Being trapped into marriage? Hardly. He was already married to her.

"Sit down," Sierra said. She asked him to pour the wine.

He poured it, then handed her a glass. He was reminded of the last time they'd drunk together—at dinner with his father and Viveca and Tommy Hargrove. He remembered the toasts. Looking at Sierra he thought she did, too. She was looking at him with a bright, eager look in her eyes.

"To you," Dominic said after a moment and touched his glass to hers.

"To us," Sierra replied with a smile. Then she drank.

Dominic drank, too. Then he dug into the lasagne and the salad and the bread. It was excellent. Simple, but delicious. And even though he'd have happily forgone it and headed straight upstairs with her, he ate now with gusto. "Really, really good," he told her, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

She hadn't eaten nearly as much as he had. She seemed to be watching him, waiting. "Good," she said. "I'm glad. I'm not much of a cook. But I'm willing to learn."

"You don't have to cook every night," Dominic said.

"That's a relief. But I intend to do plenty. If it's okay with you. I was wondering what kind of foods you like."

"Most anything. I'm not picky."

"Italian? You like lasagne. Have you been to Italy? I always thought Italy would be a lovely place to go. I never got there, even when I was in France, can you believe it?" She was talking rapidly. Even more rapidly than Sierra usually did.

"You've never been to Italy?"

She shook her head. "There's a lot of places I haven't been. Jamaica. Cancún. Niagara Falls. The Poconos."

Dominic blinked, trying to follow that, wondering what those places had in common. Maybe they were the only places Sierra had never been.

"What about Alaska?" he asked. "Have you been there?"

Her eyes widened. "Alaska? No, never. It sounds...great! Amazing."

"It's beautiful," Dominic agreed. "Rhys and I have gone fishing there several times."

"Oh." She looked a little puzzled, but then she smiled again. "Alaska's great," she said again.

Dominic frowned slightly. Was she angling to go along when he went fishing with Rhys again? He'd never taken a woman along on a fishing trip before. It was a time to be gnarly and grubby and unshaven. But the thought of having Sierra there to share a sleeping bag with made him consider rethinking his decision.

"Maybe we could do that in the summer," he said.

She brightened. "Summer! Oh, yes, that'd be terrific." She plied herself to the lasagne then. When she leaned forward slightly, his shirt gapped at her neck and he could see right down into it. He could watch the shadowed rise and fall of her creamy breasts.

He shifted in his chair, trying to adjust the fit of his slacks. One of his feet connected with Sierra's. Her toes slid up his ankle and rubbed against his shin. She smiled at him over her wineglass.

Dominic raised his and took a hasty gulp of wine, finishing his glass.

Sierra held out the bottle. "More?" Her toes slid slightly higher.

"Not...right now," Dominic said.

"Whenever you want any, then," Sierra said. She wet her lips. "Just help yourself."

"Do you want to finish this meal or not?" Dominic growled.

She giggled. "I'm getting pretty full. I think I might be ready for the next course."

He didn't think she meant food. "About time." His urgency whistled through his teeth. He shoved back his chair and stood.

Sierra stood, too. He saw light and hunger and happiness in her eyes.

"I thought you'd be ticked," he said.

A tiny line appeared between her brows. "Ticked? At what? Why should I be?"

“You shouldn’t. But I forgot last night to tell you I’d called your agent and canceled your work.”

“Well, I admit it was high-handed of you,” Sierra said. “But under the circumstances, I decided to forgive you.” She came around the table and lifted her arms and looped them around his neck. She kissed his chin, then his lips.

And he kissed hers, tasting wine and tomato and a hint of something totally Sierra. It sent his blood pumping through his veins.

“Circumstances?”

“The honeymoon,” Sierra said, looking up into his eyes. “Where are we going? Obviously not Alaska. So where?”

Dominic pulled back and stared at her. “What honeymoon?”

CHAPTER SIX

SIERRA stepped back and stared at him. “What do you mean, what honeymoon? You told Bruce we were going on a honeymoon!”

Dominic looked, for one brief instant, discomfited. Then resolutely he shook his head. “Perhaps he misunderstood.”

“Bruce doesn’t misunderstand things like that. He’s paid to note details. That’s his job. Did you or did you not tell him we were going on a honeymoon?”

“I said *you* were on your honeymoon!” Dominic bit out.

“Just me?” Sierra said after a moment’s silent regrouping. “Not *you*?”

“When in the hell would I have time to go on a honeymoon? I’ve got work to do! Demands. Meetings. Mergers. I have a job!”

“I have a job, too.”

“You don’t need it now.”

“I want it.”

He looked surprised. Then he smiled and gave a small laugh. “You want to stand on your feet all day fiddling with peoples’ hair? You want to listen to idiots yell at you and tell you what to do and then change their minds five minutes later?”

“Yes,” she said fiercely.

He looked incredulous. Then he wiped a hand down his face and stared at her some more. “You’re kidding.”

She shook her head, wrapping her arms across her chest. “No, I’m not.”

“You jumped at the chance to not be there today!”

“Because I thought we were going on a honeymoon!”

He sighed. “You know I can’t get away.”

“I didn’t know that,” she said stubbornly.

“Well, I can’t.”

“You don’t want to.” That was what it came down to. She was no more than a plaything, a good-time girl. Someone to have fun with in bed, but not to have a relationship with.

He was silent. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“I notice you’re not denying it,” she said acidly.

“I’d love to go on a honeymoon with you, Sierra, but—”

“I’d love for you to go to hell all by yourself, Dominic!” And, terrified that she might actually cry, Sierra spun away and snatched up the plates, heading for the kitchen.

Dominic came after her, grabbed them out of her hands, dumped them on the counter, and turned her in his arms. “Don’t,” he said.

She gaped at him. “*Don’t?* Don’t get mad? Don’t care that you just ripped my work out of my life for no good reason?”

“I was trying to make your life easier. To give you a break. To make you happy.”

“Sure you were.” She lifted her hands and shoved his off her arms.

“You want to make me happy? Let’s go somewhere. Let’s learn what makes each other tick. Let’s find more we have in common than sex.”

His jaw grew tight and his expression became shuttered. Watching it happen, Sierra felt as if she were being punched in the gut. There was a physical pain somewhere in her midsection—because she knew he didn’t want her.

Not the way she wanted him to want her.

Not all of her.

He only wanted the physical Sierra Kelly—Wolfe, she corrected herself. Damn it to hell!—that made him feel good.

“No? We aren’t going to go? Imagine that. Fine. We’ll stay here. But I’m going back to work. Tomorrow. And I’m working every damn day I want, and you’re not going to stop me.”

“Sierra, it’s not necessary.”

“I’ll decide what’s necessary!” She grabbed the lasagne pan, slapped some foil on it, then stuck it in the refrigerator. She did the same with the salad, her movements jerky and furious. She banged the dishes into the sink and began to scrub them hard enough to rub the pattern right off.

“I have a dishwasher,” Dominic said over the sound of the water.

“And now you have two.” Sierra thumped the pasta pot down into the sink and set to work on it, too.

“Sierra.” He sounded patient and long-suffering and totally in control.

She wanted to punch him in the nose. Instead she took her rage out on the pot.

“I don’t need you to be a dishwasher.” He came up behind her and slid his arms around her. She could feel the heat and hardness of his body

against her back, and it took all her control not to melt right back against him. Her traitorous body wanted to.

But not her mind. Her mind was furious, and angriest of all was her heart.

“No,” she said bitterly, “you just need me in your bed.”

“I like you in my bed,” he corrected.

“Well, that’s just too damn bad, because I’m not going to be there anymore!”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Sierra! Stop being melodramatic. You can’t tell me you don’t like being there, too.”

She thumped the pot down and whirled around, shoving him back with wet hands that left an imprint on his suit coat. “Of course I like being there. And once that was dandy. But now we’re married. There’s more to marriage than that!”

“I can’t give more than that.”

Once the words were out of his mouth, he looked as if he wanted to call them back. His lips pressed into a tight line and he glared at her. Like it was her fault!

“Why?” She didn’t shout the question. She asked it very calmly, quietly almost. But it didn’t mean she didn’t want to know.

“I *won’t* give more than that,” he corrected himself.

“Oh, thank you very much!”

“Christ, Sierra. It’s not that I don’t like you. I do. It’s just...I don’t want to get involved!”

She stared at him, openmouthed. “You don’t want to get involved? Then why the hell did you marry me?”

He didn’t answer.

And that was answer enough.

“For the sex,” she said bitterly. She rubbed her palms dry on the sides of his shirt that she wore. It had seemed like such a good idea when she’d put it on. It had made him seem so close—as if they were a part of each other.

And now he was telling her he didn’t want that.

He didn’t want her.

Except in bed.

She folded her arms beneath her breasts. “I can’t do that.”

He looked halfway between furious and astonished. “What do you mean you can’t do it? We’ve done it!”

“It isn’t enough. Not now. Not anymore.”

“So what do you want to do, back out? Run away downtown again? Get a divorce? Give me back my half million?”

Oh, damn.

Because she’d managed to think, *yes, yes, and yes* to his first three questions. Her fingernails dug into her arms.

“I can’t do that,” she muttered.

His eyes widened. “You spent it?”

She stared out the window across the park and saw nothing. “I gave it away.”

“*What?*”

Her gaze snapped back to meet his incredulous one. “I gave it away,” she repeated stonily.

“To the homeless? To the starving poor of the Lower East Side?”

“To a friend of mine whose son needs a kidney transplant!”

He blinked, then shook his head. “What? What friend? Who?”

“My friend Pammie who lives in my building. Her son Frankie needs one and they fell through the cracks insurance-wise. She needed a quarter of a million to get him on the list. I can give you back half of it now. I’ll figure out some way to—”

“The hell you will!” He was shaking his head, pacing the confines of the kitchen like some furious jungle cat, raking his hand through his hair. “Keep the damn money! It’s not important!”

“To you—”

“To me!” he shouted, then whirled and glared at her, spitting the words, “Do. You. Want. A. Divorce?”

“Do you?” Sierra asked quietly.

He went stone still. A muscle ticked in his temple and beneath hooded lids his blue eyes were almost midnight. He let out a harsh breath. “I don’t know.” He slammed a fist into his other palm.

At least, Sierra thought, he was being honest. She supposed she ought to be glad of that. “When you do know,” she said politely, “I’d appreciate your telling me.”

He snorted. “You’ll be the first to know.” The words hissed through his teeth.

“Thank you.” Her voice sounded frosty, her heart was more so. She felt like ice, brittle and cold, about to crack.

“If you want one...” Dominic began, then stopped.

She shook her head. “I won’t be leaving until I can pay my debts.”

“I told you—”

“No,” she said fiercely. “When I make a deal, Wolfe, I make a deal. I intend to keep it. I married you. For better or worse,” she said bitterly.

“But you won’t just sleep with me.”

They stared at each other, Dominic challenging, Sierra despairing.

“At the present time,” she said in a quiet voice that she hoped to God didn’t sound as desperate as she felt, “I don’t think that would be advisable.”

She didn’t think it would be “advisable”!

Dominic swore and slammed his fist on the mattress as he stared up at the ceiling above his bed. His very wide, very empty bed.

“Well, you let me know when you think it is,” he’d said with his best sarcastic sneer as they’d faced each other in the kitchen hours before. And then he’d stalked out. He’d grabbed his briefcase and holed up in his study, trying to do the work he’d brought home so he wouldn’t obsess over Sierra every minute he was with her.

Yeah, sure.

He hadn’t got a damn thing done. He’d spent the rest of the evening staring at meaningless drivel on paper while his mind played and replayed everything that had happened that evening over again.

And while he played it over he heard her crashing dishes and pots and pans around in his kitchen. Slamming cupboards. Banging drawers.

Like she had a right to be angry because he didn’t want to go on a honeymoon. Because he didn’t want them to spend every minute in each other’s pocket. Because he didn’t want what she wanted in this marriage!

If she’d wanted that sort of marriage, damn it all, she shouldn’t have married him!

Why would she do anything so stupid as say yes to a man she’d only spent one glorious night with—if she wanted a traditional marriage?

It didn’t make a bloody bit of sense.

Nor did it make sense that she was sleeping down the hall and he was here alone in his bed!

But that's where she was. She'd come upstairs while he was working in the bedroom he used as a study, and when he went past the room where he'd had the movers put her stuff, the door was closed and locked.

He knew it was locked because he'd tried the handle. Lightly. Carefully. So she wouldn't even notice. It hadn't moved.

He'd debated just walking on by and ignoring it, but finally, annoyed, he'd said loudly, "You're being juvenile, Sierra."

She didn't reply.

He rattled the door handle.

No response.

"Childish," he said loudly.

Still nothing.

Damn her! How could she do this? He'd waited all day for her!

Well, fine, if that was the way she was going to be, she could just lie in there by herself all night. He didn't need her.

He didn't need anyone!

Five hours later he was still telling himself the same thing.

And pretty well convinced that Sierra was stubborn enough not to think going to bed with him was going to be "advisable" tonight.

He rolled over onto his side, pounded the pillow and thumped his head down onto it. Then he stared across the expanse of bed that, last night, he had shared with Sierra. One night and she had infiltrated his bedroom as if she'd been there forever.

He rolled over again, turning his back on the side where she'd slept—and remembered how she'd snuggled up behind him and slid her arms around him, how her hand had—

Cripes! He had to stop this!

His body remembered even better than his mind. And certain parts of his body were not happy at all.

And lying there thinking about what he wasn't getting wasn't making them any happier. He threw off the covers, threw a T-shirt on over his boxers, and went out into the hall. Not a sound emanated from behind Sierra's locked door.

He wondered if she was asleep.

He hoped she wasn't.

He wanted her suffering as much as he was. That would show her how "advisable" sleeping alone was!

“Well, that was the shortest honeymoon on record,” Bruce said when she called him about working the next morning.

“We decided it would be better to wait,” Sierra said, which was about the kindest thing you could say about what had happened between her and Dominic the night before.

Bruce grunted. “I’ll let Finn and Gib know you’re working again. I’m sure Finn will want you tomorrow. He was grumbling last night when I told him you were going to be gone. So count on him. I’ll be in touch, and I’ll put you back on the books for everyone else.”

Which left her today to get through. Yesterday had been easy. She’d been dancing on air yesterday, delighted with life and with the prospect of her marriage.

Today it was harder to be sanguine. Today it was damned difficult even to muster a Sierra Kelly trademark smile.

Of course she wasn’t Sierra Kelly anymore. Technically.

But in every other way, apparently, she was. Dominic certainly didn’t want to make a real marriage out of what they had. He only wanted a live-in bed partner.

The very thought made Sierra want to spit.

Well, really, she chided herself. What did she expect?

Love.

It was as stupid and simple as that.

She was such a foolish optimist, such a ridiculous Pollyanna, that she’d expected he’d fall in love with her the way she was falling in love with him.

At the very least, she expected he would try.

Sierra gave points for trying.

Dominic wasn’t getting any points at all. In fact he was so far in the hole that she thought he would probably never reach zero again if it took him the rest of his life.

Not that he was trying.

He’d stalked off to his study after their little blowup—and he’d still been there when she’d gone up to her room. He’d stayed there a good long time, too, immersed in his files and his mergers and his papers.

It was well past midnight when she heard his footsteps outside her door. She’d heard him stop, then try the handle.

As if!

Like she would have left the lock undone so he could just come in and grab a quickie before he barricaded himself in his own little business world once more!

And then he'd had the audacity to tell her she was being childish. She was tempted to throw a pot at the door. If he wanted to see childish, she would be only too happy to show him!

But she hadn't. She'd glared in stony silence at the locked door, and finally he'd gone away.

She'd heard him banging around in his room, making plenty of noise, letting her know how displeased he was.

Well, he could take his displeasure and shove it, Sierra thought. She'd be glad to help!

Finally the noise had abated. The room had quieted. And Dominic, no doubt, had gone right to sleep.

Sierra had spent the rest of the night fuming. If she slept at all, it was close to dawn and she only dozed fitfully, dreaming alternately about making love with him and throttling him. The latter dreams gave her far more satisfaction. And then, close to five-thirty, she heard the shower go on in his bathroom.

"Getting an early start?" she muttered sourly.

Undoubtedly. He wouldn't want to let more than a couple of hours go by when he wasn't totally consumed with his work. Still furious, she rolled over, pulled the pillow and the blanket over her head and shut out the sound of Dominic.

Not until she was sure he was gone to work did she get up and unlock the door.

Then she took a leisurely shower, dressed in her own clothes this time. There was nothing romantic or sexy or remotely enticing about wearing one of Dominic's shirts. In fact she was tempted to burn the one she had worn. Fortunately she had just enough maturity not to do anything quite that stupid.

Pity she had been stupid enough to marry the man.

Pity she'd been stupid enough to bare her heart to Mariah, too. Now her sister would be worrying and, worse, very likely meddling.

Sierra decided she would have to put a stop to that before Mariah even got started. So she took a bus to the West Side and, fetching Reuben

sandwiches from Mariah's favorite deli, she turned up on her sister's doorstep for lunch.

"You're not going to be morning sick, are you?" she asked when her sister opened the door. Last year Mariah had opened the door, taken one whiff of the corned beef and sauerkraut sandwiches and dashed for the bathroom.

"Blessedly no," Mariah said. "Not yet. Good grief. Stephen and Lizzie aren't even six months old. Come on in. How did dinner go?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about." Sierra came in and shut the door.

Of course Mariah was furious. "That jerk!" she exclaimed when Sierra gave her a brief and reasonably objective rundown of last evening's encounter. "He actually *said* he doesn't want to get involved?" She paced around the living room of the brownstone apartment she and Rhys shared, Stephen bouncing on her hip.

"That's what he said." Sierra was spreading out the lunch so they could picnic on the coffee table.

"Humph." Mariah lifted her small son up and looked squarely into his eyes. "Your uncle's an idiot," she told him. "You will *not* grow up to be like him!"

"Of course he won't," Sierra said firmly. "He'll be just like Rhys."

"Oh, there's good news," Mariah said dryly. "Rhys is so enlightened."

"He's come around," Sierra reminded her. Rhys hadn't wanted to be involved either. He'd literally run the other way when he'd discovered Mariah was expecting the twins. Now, though, you couldn't ask for a more doting husband and father.

"So there is hope, then." Mariah sat cross-legged on the floor and set Stephen down beside her. "Let's eat quick," she said. "Before Lizzie wakes up." She took a bite out of her sandwich.

Sierra sat down opposite her sister and unwrapped her own. Maybe there was hope, but she wasn't going to kid herself anymore. She was done being Pollyanna where her relationship with Dominic was concerned.

"He'll come around," Mariah promised, "just like Rhys did."

"You say that now." Sierra poked glumly at a piece of sauerkraut sticking out of her sandwich. "You didn't sound so confident six months ago."

“Well, I wasn’t,” Mariah admitted. “But Rhys had reasons not to want to get involved.”

“Presumably Dominic does, too.”

“His wife didn’t die,” Mariah said. “He didn’t lose an unborn child.”

Which Rhys had, Sierra knew.

“He got dumped at the altar though. That must have hurt.”

Silently, simultaneously, they both considered the awfulness of that. Sierra couldn’t imagine a man as proud as Dominic suffering it easily. And she could see very clearly why he wouldn’t want to get involved again.

It wasn’t a comforting realization.

Stephen waved his arms and rocked back and forth, trying to reach his mother’s sandwich until finally he toppled over and started to cry. Mariah scooped him up and hugged him, then, when he’d stopped fussing, she set him back on the floor.

“You’ve got to do that with Dominic.”

Sierra blinked. “What? Pick him up, brush him off and assure him he’s going to be fine? I don’t think so.”

“You have to be there for him,” Mariah insisted. She coaxed a smile out of Stephen. He gurgled and batted at her.

He had his father’s and his uncle’s blue eyes and Sierra wondered what it would be like to share a child with Dominic. The thought actually hurt. But it made her say, “Like you were there for Rhys, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“And you think Dominic, like Rhys, will see the light?”

“Yes,” Mariah said more slowly.

“I can just hear all the confidence in your voice,” Sierra said dryly.

“Well, he and Rhys are different. He’s a little harder. More businesslike. But I can’t believe he’d feel worse about being jilted than Rhys did about Sarah dying, for goodness’ sake!”

“Maybe not. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to fall in love with me. Rhys was your friend at least...first.”

“You have to start somewhere.”

“Well, Dominic and I started in bed—and I don’t think the success rate is as high as if you’re friends.”

“But not nonexistent, surely. Where’s your innate optimism? Where’s your supreme self-confidence?”

“I think they died last night.”

“Don’t let them,” Mariah said urgently. “You can’t.”

“Yesterday you were telling me he was a lost cause.”

“He’s not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he married you. He wouldn’t have married you if he hadn’t felt something.”

“He might have married me because he felt nothing and preferred it that way!”

“Do you really think so?”

And Sierra, confronted with the blunt question, hesitated a long moment, then shook her head slowly. “No. But—”

“So bear with him. Give him a chance.”

“Pick him up and dust him off?”

“Just be there. Propinquity.”

“I don’t know those big words.”

“The nearness of you,” Mariah translated.

Sierra wanted to believe in it. She wanted to hope. But she was afraid. “What if...what if it doesn’t work?” Her throat seemed to close on the words.

“What have you lost by trying?” Mariah asked gently.

When you put it like that...

“You’re right,” Sierra said.

Something smelled delicious when he opened the door that evening.

Just like last night.

God, he didn’t want a rerun of last night.

Not that he was likely to get one. He figured she had probably cooked for herself and he was smelling what she’d already eaten an hour or two before.

It was after eight when he got there. He’d had a meeting with Kent and a couple of the men in his office that lasted until six-thirty. Then he’d taken his time going over what they’d discussed, making notes, leaving a recording for Shyla to type up tomorrow morning. He’d done it with the thorough deliberation with which he had always worked in his pre-Sierra days—those days when his mind had been blessedly unfogged by lust and desire and a woman with purple hair.

He tried telling himself that it had been unfogged tonight. But that wasn't true. He still thought about her every minute or two. He just resisted the thoughts now. He refused to allow himself to dwell on what they'd do when he got home tonight.

He knew what they'd be doing. He'd be in the study working and she'd be in her room. *If* she even stayed home.

It was wondering if she'd be there that finally got him out of the office and hurrying on his way home. Not that he'd go looking for her if she wasn't!

But he couldn't deny he'd wanted to know.

And he couldn't deny the shaft of pure relief he felt when he turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door to be greeted by mouth-watering smells emanating from the kitchen, and the soft Caribbean sounds of Jimmy Buffett on the stereo.

He set down his briefcase, then picked it up again, intending to take it to the study straight away. But before he could move, Sierra came out of the kitchen.

She wasn't wearing his shirt.

No surprise there, of course. But he felt oddly bereft to see she was wearing a pair of faded denim jeans and a scoop-necked, long-sleeved pale pink T-shirt. She looked...normal. Except, of course, for the hair.

"I fixed some beef bourguignonne this afternoon," she said casually. "Would you like some?"

What was he going to say? No?

"That'd be...good." He hoped he didn't sound as awkward as he felt. "I'll just put my briefcase away."

"Sure. We're eating in the kitchen." She disappeared again, leaving him to stare after her for a long minute before he gave himself a shake and carried his briefcase to his study and left it there. He washed up, then went back to the kitchen where Sierra had served the meal. She was already sitting on one side of the small table.

She looked up fleetingly when he came in and gave him a vague smile, then focused on her plate again.

Dominic sat down opposite her. "Looks good." His voice sounded too loud for the small room. "Is this another of your mother's recipes?"

He usually had no trouble at all making small talk. He'd been raised to make social conversation by both his parents. He could do it in his sleep.

He couldn't seem to do it with Sierra without feeling like a fool.

But she nodded gravely. "Mariah gave it to me. I was never interested enough in cooking before."

Dominic wanted to ask, *before what?* but he didn't dare. He took a bite of the meat dish and savored it. "Tastes even better than it looks."

This time he got more of a real smile from her.

"There's plenty," she said, then sighed. "It makes enough to feed the French Foreign Legion. We'll probably be eating it for a week."

He took heart from that. She'd said *we*, and she'd said *week*. That didn't sound like she was planning to leave him. The meal tasted even better after that.

He ate two big helpings and, she was right, there was still a lot left. Besides that, there was salad and some leftover garlic bread from last night, too. Also the rest of the bottle of the wine they'd drunk.

Neither of them mentioned last night.

Sierra, in fact, didn't talk at all, which meant that things were definitely not normal. Still, he was glad she wasn't holed up in her room, shutting him out, which is what he'd expected.

He studied her silently over his wineglass. Most of the time when he watched Sierra, it was with an eye to what was going to happen next—or more bluntly, he was busy gauging when he was going to get her into bed and what was going to happen when he got her there.

They were thoughts worthy of consideration, to be sure. But Dominic was smart enough to know he wasn't going to get her in bed tonight.

Still he couldn't stop looking at her. His gaze seemed drawn to the soft curve of her cheek, the creamy length of her neck, the pulse beating at the base of her throat. Her gaze was hooded. She gave the meal her full attention and didn't pay any attention to him at all.

He started to talk, to tell her about something that had happened in the office, then didn't. She wouldn't care. And he didn't really want to tell her. He'd just be making conversation. He, too, focused on the meal.

When they were finished eating, Sierra stood up at once. "I'll clear up," she said briskly. "I'm sure you have work to do."

You're dismissed. She couldn't have said it more clearly without using the words.

And it was true, he did have work to do, but something stopped him. "I'll help you with the dishes."

His willingness surprised her no more than it did him. What was he, a glutton for punishment? He wasn't getting anything out of her tonight—and he had a briefcase full of papers he needed to go over.

Still, he didn't like being superfluous. Didn't like being dismissed. He helped clear the table, and when she scraped the dishes, he loaded the dishwasher.

As they were finishing, and he put the last pan in, she wiped her hands on a towel. "I'm going back to work tomorrow. At Finn's."

There was a note of determination in her voice, followed by a moment's pause, as if she was waiting for him to object and for the battle to begin to rage again. Dominic inclined his head to show he'd heard.

When he didn't immediately reply, she added stiffly, "I just thought I should tell you ahead of time." There was just enough hesitancy in her voice to make him wonder if her words were a slap at his way of having handled things or an attempt at being conciliatory.

"Suit yourself," he said, and tried for the same neutral expression that she'd used.

"I intend to," she said quietly. For just an instant their gazes met. Instantly both of them looked away.

"Good night, then," Sierra said. She turned and headed for the stairs.

Dominic stared after her, watching the gentle sway of her hips in those skintight jeans, and felt an ache he knew all too well.

"Sierra?" Her name was out of his mouth before he realized it.

She stopped, one hand on the banister, looked back at him. "Yes?"

A moment of silence washed over them both. He shook his head.

"Nothing. Good night."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“SHORT honeymoon,” Finn said when Sierra walked into work the next morning. “Everything okay?”

Sierra smiled her best sunny smile. “Of course. Dominic just had something come up. You know how these corporate hotshots are. We decided to postpone.”

“Well, go somewhere,” Finn advised. “Izzy and I and the girls went to Bora Bora.”

“Bora Bora? I didn’t know that! Whyever did you—”

“Started out as a joke.” Finn grinned. “Remember when my sister dumped Tansy and Pansy on me? It was so she could take off to Bora Bora with a guy. Izzy and I were stuck with the kids while she went out to have a good time. We had a pretty good time ourselves, eventually,” he recalled with a smile. “After Izzy and I finally decided to tie the knot, I said we’d go to Bora Bora on our honeymoon and take the girls.”

He shrugged. “She held me to it.”

Izzy would, Sierra thought. Izzy was a force.

“Nothing like a little sea and sand and sun to get a marriage off on the right foot,” Finn went on, a faraway look of longing in his eyes.

It sounded heavenly to Sierra, too. “That’s an idea,” she said. She didn’t tell him that Dominic had no intention of getting their marriage off on any foot at all.

She got home late that evening because the ad agency rep kept changing his mind. It was nearly seven when she arrived.

Dominic was standing in the doorway to the kitchen when she pushed open the door. His normally neat hair was ruffled, as if he’d been running his fingers through it. His tie was jerked loose, and one shirt button was undone at his neck.

“Where were—” he exhaled sharply, words coming to a complete stop as she set her tackle box on the floor. He took another breath, then said, “Worked late?” in an almost casual tone.

Almost, Sierra thought. Not quite. Had he been worried? Had he thought she’d left? He couldn’t have. All her things were still upstairs.

But why else would he be looking so frantic?

She nodded. "Yes. It was Ballou again. Never make one decision when five will do."

Dominic grinned faintly. "I've had managers like that. Briefly."

"Well, I wish he worked for you. You could fire him." She flexed her shoulders wearily. It had been that sort of day.

"I picked up Chinese," Dominic said. "I figured it was my turn in the kitchen, and I got home too late to want to bother figuring out what to cook."

Sierra had trouble keeping her jaw from dragging on her toes. They were going to be taking turns cooking?

Dominic had stopped and got dinner?

"I hope you like Mongolian beef and cashew chicken," he said. "I got some spring rolls and some wontons and some bird's nest soup, too." He looked like he wasn't just making conversation but was waiting for a reply.

So Sierra nodded. "Sounds...fantastic. I'll wash up."

The table was a sea of small white cardboard boxes when she entered the kitchen a few moments later. Dominic gestured for her to sit, then sat down opposite her.

Sierra hadn't eaten all day and she was as hungry as she was exhausted. The first bite was ambrosial and she whimpered.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "N-nothing. I...it's so good. Thank you." She smiled at him.

Dominic smiled back. And for a few seconds Sierra felt an even deeper connection than she had all those times that their hormones had been in sync. Then Dominic bent his head over his bowl and began to eat.

Once her initial hunger was sated, she started to talk. For one night, perhaps, she could keep silent. But it wasn't her way not to talk during meals. She told him about Ballou. She could write a book of hair-pulling stories about Ballou. And telling them, she made Dominic smile, and then she made him laugh.

And when they'd finished, she said, "I'd like a cup of coffee. Would you?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "All right."

They cleaned up the kitchen together while the coffee was brewing. Sierra took hers out to stand and look over the park bathed now in late

evening shadows. Across the way she could catch just a glimpse of the tiny white lights that marked the Tavern on the Green. They looked magical. Like fairy lights. Or stars.

When she'd been a child she'd lain out on the grass in their front yard in Kansas and stared up at night into a sky awash with stars. She'd never been sure which was the first one—the wishing star—so she'd always wished on all of them.

Most nights she couldn't see stars here in New York City. There were too many other lights.

But it didn't stop her wishing.

She clutched her coffee cup, held it against her mouth and let the steam rise, blurring her eyes. And she pretended the lights across the park were wishing stars.

And she said inside her heart, *I wish it would work.*

She felt more than heard Dominic come to stand beside her. He didn't stand close. There had to be a foot separating them in physical space. She didn't even want to think how much emotional space there was.

Before their blowup he would have taken the coffee cup out of her hands and turned her in his arms and kissed her. He would have run his hands up under her shirt and rubbed his fingers over her sensitive nipples. And she would have responded in kind.

She would have made quick work of those buttons and that half-mast tie. She might have teased him with it. She surely would have pleased him with it.

She stood absolutely still. She even stopped breathing, praying that he wouldn't try, that he wouldn't touch. She wanted him as much as she ever had.

But she wanted more of him than he was ready to give. So she would have to pull back. Say no.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and sipped from his mug. "Good coffee. Thanks."

"Thank you...for dinner."

They stood still and silent in the darkened room, side by side, not looking at each other.

Then Dominic said, "Gotta get to work."

And Sierra said, "Of course."

Lying alone in bed that night, she tried to think positive thoughts.

He tried not to think about her.

It didn't work.

He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter whether she was in his bed or not, marrying her had accomplished what he'd wanted it to—his father had gone back to Florida and there were no more phone calls about women Dominic ought to consider making his wife.

Because he had a wife.

Living down the hall from him.

It set his teeth on edge. It made him clench his fists and want to pound something or someone. It made him crazy with longing for her.

But he didn't push.

He was afraid to push. Because he was afraid, if he did, she would walk out for good.

He told himself that didn't matter either. And he believed it for about twenty-four hours. But that night when he'd come home and she wasn't there, he'd felt as if all the air had been sucked right out of him.

He'd stopped to pick up Chinese because he was early for a change. And he figured, since she'd gone back to work that day, that she wouldn't want to have to fix a meal. He'd expected to arrive home about the same time she did or maybe right after—soon enough that he could tell her not to bother cooking dinner.

But she hadn't been there.

An hour passed and she never came. He'd felt a niggling nervousness, a sort of free-floating worry. Had something happened to her? Had she been run over by a bus?

Had she left him?

It wasn't the first thought that occurred to him.

But it was the one that sent him bounding up the stairs to check the room she slept in. Memories of the abortive wedding with Carin played in his head. And he'd breathed a sigh of relief to see that everything was still there.

For now. Maybe she was just out arranging to have her things moved. He'd paced and puttered for another half an hour, wondering if he should go look, telling himself not to be stupid, before he heard the key turn in the lock.

At the sight of her, weary and exhausted and lugging that damned tackle box, he felt a whoosh of relief like nothing he'd ever felt before.

Later, though, he'd been annoyed with himself. It wasn't like he couldn't have survived without her, for goodness' sake.

Still, as the days wore on, he was glad she was there.

It surprised him, really, how now that he wasn't going to bed with her, he found other things about her to admire.

He knew from experience how devoted she was to her sister. But now he saw how devoted she was to her friends. There was, of course, the astonishing gift of his money she'd made to her friend, Pammie. That had been in a good cause, of course. But she was often busy doing something small but significant for someone else.

She took a psychedelic stuffed duck to work one day for Gib and Chloe Walker's little son, Brendan.

"Is it his birthday?" Dominic asked.

Sierra shook her head. "Brendan likes ducks. And I saw this one yesterday and I couldn't resist."

She brought home a sack of fresh fortune cookies one day and handed them to him.

"What are these for?" Dominic looked at them mystified.

"You like them," Sierra said. "You're always eating mine."

Which was true. He did like them. But he'd never had anyone notice before. "Well, er, thanks," he said. And because she was standing there expectantly watching him, he plucked one out, cracked it open and popped it into his mouth.

"And your fortune is?" she prompted.

"It isn't the fortunes I like," he said, his mouth full.

"Even so," she insisted.

He unfolded the tiny white paper. "'Don't look back.'"

Sierra laughed, delighted. "Sounds like my kind of fortune."

That was something else he liked about her. She didn't look back and brood. She looked forward and around her, and did what she could to enjoy life—and see that others did, too.

Later that week at breakfast—she was eating breakfast with him now, too—she told him she was going to be late that night, that she wouldn't be home for dinner.

"Got a hot date?" Dominic asked before he could stop himself.

She blinked, surprised, then shook her head. "I told Mariah I'd baby-sit so she and Rhys could go out to dinner. They really need a night out for themselves."

"Oh. Right." He felt foolish. He'd never thought about how demanding it must be to have twins.

He tried not to think about it—and while he was at work he did fairly well. There was always more than enough to keep him busy at work—as long it was interesting enough to keep Sierra off his brain.

It would be good for her to be gone tonight, he told himself when he came home. He'd done just fine without her for a lot of years. It wasn't as if he needed her there.

But he wondered if maybe she needed him.

So he called his brother's and asked Sierra if she'd like him to bring over dinner.

"You have time?" she sounded surprised.

"I have to eat," he said gruffly. "I might as well do it with you."

"Well, when you put it so nicely, I don't see how I can refuse," she said. But she wasn't really sarcastic. Her gently teasing tone just made him ashamed of his surliness.

He picked up some Burmese food from a place near Rhys's, and when he got there he found that she had set the picnic table in the back garden of Rhys and Mariah's brownstone.

"It's nice here," Sierra said. "Like being in the country."

After they'd eaten she stretched out in a chaise longue, balancing Lizzie on her thighs and letting the baby hold on to her hands as she bounced up and down, giggling and grinning. Sierra was grinning, too.

She looked young and happy and very maternal as she played with Lizzie. They rubbed noses and giggled some more. Then Sierra blew kisses against Lizzie's soft belly and got a full-blown gurgle out of her niece.

She was very good with children. It made Dominic wonder if she wanted some of her own.

They'd never talked about children. They'd never talked about much.

Experimentally he rolled a ball toward Stephen who was sitting on the patio banging a spoon. The little boy batted the spoon at it and the ball rolled partway back.

"Wow! Look at that. What a swing! He's going to be a ball player," Sierra said with a grin.

Dominic couldn't help grinning, too. "Of course he is. All Wolfe men play ball."

Sierra's brows lifted. "Even you?"

"Of course me," he said, affronted. "I pitched my team to the state semi-finals in high school. I won there, too. A three-hitter," he added, and was unaccountably pleased when she looked impressed.

"Did you play in college?"

He shook his head. "No. No time. I started working for the firm then, plus I was going to school full-time, double major in accounting and communications technology. Baseball was just a game. Dad figured it was time to grow up."

"Dad ought to mind his own business," Sierra muttered.

Sometimes, traitorously, Dominic had thought that, too. But he'd never ever articulated it. "The firm is important. It was Dad's sweat and blood. Long hours and a hell of a lot of determination. It's our livelihood. And I needed to learn it from the ground up."

"I didn't say it wasn't," Sierra said. "I just think it's too bad you didn't get to play ball if you wanted to."

"We don't always get what we want," Dominic said gruffly.

"Not always," Sierra agreed. She gave Lizzie one more bounce. "You have to decide if it's worth fighting for."

Her words stayed with him. They echoed in his head all that evening and for days afterward.

It would help, he thought, if he knew what the hell he wanted.

He'd thought he did—the business, freedom from parental harassment, and a wife who knew her place, which was in his bed.

But the longer he spent with Sierra, the less he was sure.

In spite of his resolve not to get involved, he spent time with her. The fact was, he liked spending time with her out of bed as well as in.

He liked coming home and eating with her, some nights even cooking with her.

He liked baby-sitting with her at Rhys's and Mariah's.

After they'd eaten, he could have gone back to their apartment. Instead he hung around.

Of course, there was a Yankee game on television and he had started watching it while she heated bottles and got the twins ready for bed.

Then she appeared next to the chair where he was sitting, handed him Stephen and a bottle and said, “Feed him.”

“What? Me?” Dominic felt something vaguely akin to panic and tried to hand the baby back.

But Sierra shook her head. “He needs a little male bonding,” she told him. “Besides, I’ve only got two arms, and I’m going to be feeding Lizzie. Relax. You’re his uncle. He loves you.”

Did he? Was being an uncle all it took? Dominic considered that as he considered the child in his arms.

He wasn’t much of an expert on love. He wasn’t really sure he believed in it.

Once upon a time he’d thought he did. Before Carin.

After Carin he’d given anything remotely resembling it a wide berth. As devastated as he’d been at Carin’s defection, he couldn’t imagine leaving himself open to caring again.

But it was hard not to care about a helpless child.

He rubbed a knuckle against Stephen’s soft cheek, then glanced up self-consciously, and felt even more so when he saw Sierra watching him.

She smiled at him. It was a warm smile. Gentle. Intimate. The same soft, satisfied look she had after he’d made love to her. As if they were sharing something special. Just the two of them.

Dominic tried to harden his heart against it. He didn’t want this. He didn’t!

So what the hell was he doing here?

He didn’t have an answer to that.

She’d thought she was in love with Dominic before.

It was nothing compared to her love for him now. Every day that she spent with him—even when he was ostensibly trying to avoid her—she found more things about him to admire, to cherish, to love.

And, of course, she still wanted to go to bed with him.

She didn’t dare.

Because the more she saw, the more she wanted. She wasn’t settling for being a wife in bed only. She wanted the whole enchilada.

It was funny how things had changed.

Her first impression of him had been that he was rich, arrogant and, because he worked on the fifty-third floor, looked down on the rest of the world. She'd been determined to bring him down a peg. He'd been surprised, then intrigued, by her attitude toward him.

"Do most people bow and scrape?" she'd asked him once.

"The men touch their forelocks, the women curtsy," he'd replied, never cracking a smile.

She hadn't thought he was kidding at first. Then she'd realized he was playing to her prejudices, having her on.

The metaphorical gloves came off. They sparred with each other first verbally, then, in Kansas after the wedding, sexually.

The battle lines were drawn.

Sierra had met her match.

She loved that. She loved his determination, his fierceness, his dedication to his work. She loved his dry sense of humor, his sharp wit. She loved his way with Stephen and Lizzie, tentative, gentle and unquestionably loving.

She loved him.

She hated that he didn't want to love her, that he thought her only value was in his bed.

She was determined he would learn otherwise. And she actually thought he might be.

He'd come with her to baby-sit, hadn't he?

And though he often came home late and disappeared to work in his study in the evening, some nights he brought home dinner so she wouldn't have to cook. And always he helped clean up after.

"My mother said boys should do their share," he told her.

"Three cheers for your mother," Sierra replied. "I wish I'd known her."

He told her about his mother and father, about what life had been like for the three Wolfe brothers growing up on Long Island as boys. As the oldest, Dominic had always been the leader, the responsible one, the one most like his father, and destined to follow in Douglas's footsteps from the moment he was born.

His mother had provided some necessary balance. But after her death, his father had held sway. And what was good for the business, had been good for Dominic.

But he never complained. He thrived on it just as his father had.

It made her try to explain her need to keep working to him. He still didn't see the need for her to do it, but he actually seemed to listen when she tried to explain.

"I like making people look good. I like making them feel good about themselves. I like pleasing them. And I like working with hair. It's alive. Responsive."

He raised an eyebrow, but he didn't contradict her.

"I like the people I work with, too. Even the bitchy cranky ones like Ballou."

"Pardon my skepticism," he said dryly.

"Well, I like almost everyone," Sierra qualified with a grin.

And she saw Finn and Izzy, Gib and Chloe, and the others she worked with as often as she ever did.

But she didn't see Pam and Frankie much. She called and talked to them on the phone a couple of times a week, and Frankie always asked when she was coming down to watch *Star Trek* with them.

And finally, because she missed them, she said, "Tomorrow. I'll come tomorrow night."

She told Dominic the next morning that she was going to visit Pam and Frankie and watch *Star Trek*.

"Why don't you invite them to watch it here?"

She must have gaped, because he scowled and shrugged dismissively.

"It won't bother me. I'll just be in my office working. Besides, I bet Frankie would rather watch on a big screen."

Frankie was thrilled. He was practically bouncing off the walls when they arrived. He looked brighter than he had in some time. He'd been through all the tests, Pam told her while Frankie, wide-eyed, looked around.

Everything was great, Pam said. Except she wasn't a good match to donate a kidney and neither was her sister. "So we just have to wait until the right match comes along."

"It will," Sierra said confidently.

"I hope so." Pam lifted her gaze to the heavens. "I'm counting on it."

"C'mere, Mom," Frankie urged. "Look out here. It's just like you're in my tree house. This is so cool," he said over and over till Pam shushed him.

"You'll bother Sierra's husband. He's working upstairs," she admonished.

He was. He'd disappeared straight after dinner. "I'll get out of your way," he'd said. She'd been going to invite him to stay, but given his eagerness to be gone, she didn't say a word.

She just wished. And then, sometime during the second episode, Sierra heard a noise in the doorway and turned around to find Dominic standing there.

"I thought I'd make some popcorn," he said. "Want some?" he asked Frankie.

The boy's eyes shone. "You bet."

Star Trek was put on hold while they made popcorn. Then the two of them sat side by side on the sofa, the popcorn bowl between them, engrossed in the video while Sierra and Pam looked at each other and shook their heads.

When the video ended, Frankie told Dominic how much his apartment looked like a tree house he'd drawn.

"You draw tree houses?" Dominic asked. And he opened a cabinet and took out a yellowed folder and showed Frankie drawings of house plans and tree house plans he'd drawn as a boy.

"Oh, cool. Way cool" Frankie exclaimed. "Lookit, Ma. Don'tcha like this one."

"I prefer this one," Dominic said, showing him an even more elaborate one.

"Oh, wow," Frankie breathed, looking at Dominic with hero worship in his eyes.

The bonding, needless to say, was mutual and intense.

"I thought he was supposed to be a stuck-up jerk," Pam whispered to Sierra when they left "the boys" to their tree houses and went to the kitchen to make some cocoa.

Sierra smiled a little wistfully. "He tries to be. Sometimes. He keeps his assets well hidden."

"I like him," Pam said.

"I do, too."

Worse, every day, heaven help her, she fell more deeply in love.

She saw how hard he worked on the business. It demanded his attention most of the day and half of the night, but he didn't seem to mind. And while he expected a lot of his employees, he treated them like human beings, too.

He came home early one night after telling Sierra he'd be late because of a meeting.

"No meeting?" she'd said, surprised.

"Canceled it."

"Why?"

"Doakes's daughter had a dance recital," he mumbled.

Sierra's eyes widened. He'd canceled a business meeting so one of his managers could go to his daughter's dance recital?

"We can meet early tomorrow morning," he'd said gruffly. "The work will get done."

"Of course it will," Sierra said. She moved to kiss him, then stopped. She couldn't do that unless she was ready to resume intimacies with him. It would be teasing if she did, taunting, tempting. Even if she didn't mean it to be.

What she wanted it to mean was that she loved him.

But she still didn't think he was ready to hear it.

He made it difficult to stay aloof, though. Just yesterday he'd called from work right after she got home.

"I'm going to be late," he said, and she smiled because in the last few days he'd taken to calling and telling her if he wasn't going to be there for dinner. "I've got to stop by the hospital."

Sierra felt an immediate stab of panic. "Why? What happened?"

"Nothing major. My secretary, Shyla, had her baby this morning, that's all. But I said I'd stop in to see her. Admire the offspring. Do you think I ought to take it a Yankees' cap?"

Dominic and his Yankees. Sierra grinned. "By all means. Gotta start 'em young. Tell her and her husband congratulations. What did they name him?"

"Deirdre Eileen," he said. "They had a girl."

Probably the only girl to go home with her very own Yankees' cap, Sierra thought as she hung up the phone and stared out the window, smiling.

Oh, Dominic! Why are you making this so difficult?

She wanted a child with him. A child like Dierdre Eileen or Stephen or Lizzie. A child to wear the smallest size Yankees' cap. To cuddle, to hug and to love. A child with Dominic's dark hair and deep blue eyes.

So, go to bed with him, her mind argued.

There was no question that he wanted her to. He still looked at her with the same hunger. He didn't say a word. He didn't have to. She saw it in his gaze.

But later that evening when he came home, telling her it was as ugly a kid as he'd ever seen, and it was a good thing he'd given it the Yankees' cap to distract peoples' attention, she burst out laughing, and they smiled at each other, and the flames of desire rose between them hot and fierce.

But still she didn't go to him.

Because she wanted not just his child, but his love.

"Your father," Shyla's replacement said the next morning, "on line one."

Dominic didn't feel the usual instant clench in his stomach that he normally felt when he heard those words. Douglas had been lying low since the night he'd met his son's new wife. But Dominic knew better than to hope such reticence would last forever.

He punched in line one and said with all the good cheer he could muster, "Dad! What's up? Haven't heard from you in a while."

"I've been busy," Douglas said flatly. "Had a reception to arrange."

"Somebody getting married?"

"You did," Douglas replied. "So I thought it was only fitting that I give you a wedding bash."

A wedding reception for him and Sierra? "We don't need—"

"Of course you do." Douglas's voice was a smooth tempered steel. "We need to introduce your bride to our friends and colleagues. Don't we?"

Dominic felt ill. "It's not necessary," he began again.

But his father cut him off. "Of course it is. Unless you're ashamed of her?"

Dominic gritted his teeth. "I'm *not* ashamed of her!"

"But you are married to her?" There was a faint desperate note in Douglas's voice.

"Of course I'm married to her! What the hell did you think? That I brought her along just to make a point?"

"You married her to make a point, didn't you?" Douglas asked mildly.

Dominic shoved his fingers through his hair. "It's my business and hers why we got married." His response was weak, and he knew it. His father's snort of derision only underscored the fact.

“You damn fool,” Douglas grated.

“I’d have been a bigger fool letting you tell me who to marry, how to run my life!”

“So you married someone entirely inappropriate instead!”

“Who says she’s inappropriate?” Dominic couldn’t believe how suddenly angry he was.

“You think she’ll fit right in, do you? No one will even notice when she takes her place on the board of the charity foundation? No one will bat an eyelash at having a purple-haired woman on the hospital committee.”

“Why should they care what color her hair is if our money is still green?”

“It’s not them who will care,” Douglas bit out. “It’s the committee!”

“Too damn bad.”

“Too damn bad,” Douglas echoed mockingly. “For God’s sake, Dominic!”

Dominic scowled, knowing exactly what his father meant, and resenting it furiously. Anyone who knew Sierra would know she was worth ten of those women. “They need to look beyond the surface,” he growled. “They need to wake up and realize not everyone in the world dresses the way they do.”

“And it was your mission in marrying Sierra to teach them that?”

“Of course not. But—”

“No, it wasn’t. It was your mission in marrying Sierra to show me up. What I want to know is, did you stop and think how all this was going to affect Sierra?”

Oh, now he was going to make it seem like Sierra was a victim? Anyone less like a victim Dominic couldn’t imagine. “She didn’t have to say yes!”

“Why did she?”

It was like being socked in the gut. A simple mild question that cut straight to the bone. As if Sierra had had no more reason to marry him than Carin—who hadn’t.

“Go to hell,” he said through his teeth.

“Sorry,” his father said quickly. “I didn’t mean—” He cleared his throat, but didn’t speak.

What, after all, Dominic wondered, was there left to say?

But being Douglas, of course, he found something. "I'm giving a reception for you, Dominic. For you and Sierra."

"Why? So you can hurt her the way you think she shouldn't be hurt?" Dominic said bitterly.

"If you believe that, you're no son of mine."

"Then why?"

"To show a little family solidarity. She's your wife. She's my daughter-in-law. She's a part of Wolfe's now."

"Lucky her," Dominic muttered. Then, "Fine," he said recklessly, "have a reception for us. Invite the whole damn city if you want."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“A RECEPTION?” Sierra beamed at the news. They were walking through Central Park on Sunday afternoon. The sun was shining. People were playing Frisbee and walking dogs and tossing footballs and, according to Sierra, all was right with the world. “How nice of him.”

Dominic didn’t think it was nice at all.

For all that the old man had blathered on about family solidarity, Dominic knew the people who would be there—most of whom wouldn’t be family, and a great many of whom would have an opinion about Sierra with her purple hair and her funky clothing—and the opinion wouldn’t be good.

Personally he didn’t give a rat’s ass what they thought of his wife. But he knew they could freeze a polar bear’s toe-nails in their dismissive, haughty, but very genteel way.

And he was damned if he was going to let them hurt Sierra.

The trouble was, he didn’t know how to prevent it, short of telling her to dye her hair brown, paint her fingernails pink, and get a dress from some subdued, sophisticated designer. And if he did that, she’d think he was embarrassed to be seen with her.

He wasn’t.

Admittedly, it made him a little self-conscious, knowing that peoples’ heads turned at the sight of the two of them together. They were turning now at the sight of Sierra in her neon pink spandex top, black leather jeans and wide-brimmed floppy hat, walking alongside him in his Brooks Brothers’ khakis and pale blue Oxford-cloth long-sleeved shirt.

“Mr. Buttondown and the free spirit,” Rhys had called them this morning when they’d had brunch with him and Mariah.

“They’re good for each other. A balance,” Mariah had said approvingly.

A balance pretty much summed it up. He was still sleeping at one end of the hall and she was at the other. She talked with him, laughed with him, cooked with him, watched TV with him. But she hadn’t touched him since the night they’d fought. It had been two weeks.

“When is the reception?” Sierra asked him now. “And where?”

Douglas had called right before they'd gone out, giving Dominic the final information. He told Sierra now, "This coming Friday. He's rented a yacht. A dinner cruise down around the tip of Manhattan Island and up the East River, then out by the Statue of Liberty."

Sierra looked delighted. "Fantastic. How romantic with the sunset and the city skyline as a backdrop!"

"And three hundred of the old man's nearest and dearest friends and associates."

Sierra blinked. "Whoa. That's a lot. But Rhys and Mariah will be there, won't they?"

Dominic nodded. "Nathan, too. Dad said he'd told Nath to turn up, and apparently he's going to."

Nathan, the middle brother, was a globe-trotting photographer, the one son who'd eschewed any interest in the family business—or the family, for the most part.

But apparently when Douglas meant family solidarity, he meant *all* the family, even if he had to haul them back from the ends of the earth.

"I'm looking forward to meeting him. Is he anything like you?"

"More like you. He doesn't own a suit."

"Heaven forbid." She laughed. "Still, it will be fun, don't you think?"

Dominic forced a smile. "Sure. It'll be great."

And if anyone gave her any grief, they'd better hope they could swim!

Friday evening. 6:00 p.m.

The moment of truth.

And as far as Sierra was concerned, definitely one of those *Anna and the King of Siam* moments. One of those mind-shattering, throat-grabbing, pure panic moments where she'd certainly have whistled a happy tune, if only she could have mustered enough spit.

They had boarded the yacht half an hour before.

"Yacht?" she'd said, gaping when she'd first seen it at the Hudson River pier. "It looks more like an ocean liner!"

Dominic had given her a grave smile. But his expression showed him to be almost as nervous as she felt, though exactly what Dominic had to be nervous about she was sure she didn't know!

They were, after all, *his* friends and *his* colleagues, *his* father's choices from *his* particular world. Oh, Finn and Izzy and the kids were coming. So were Chloe and Gib and Brendan, and two or three other couples whose names Dominic had got from her, including Sam and Josie Fletcher and their son, Jake. Not to mention, Rhys and Mariah, Dominic's brother Nathan and, to Sierra's surprise, her own parents.

"Of course I invited them," Douglas had said just minutes before. "It's only proper."

Proper.

That was what Sierra was worried about.

Ordinarily she didn't. Ordinarily she just went her merry way, did what she thought was right, and let the chips fall where they might.

But "right" wasn't necessarily the same in the world Dominic often inhabited. And she desperately didn't want to embarrass him.

She loved him, regardless of how he felt about her. And while she didn't think he had any great expectations of marriage—except of course the sex he wasn't getting at the moment—she didn't want him to regret marrying her.

So she was going to try to behave like some finishing school female for the next six hours, even though she thought she might croak.

She wondered again if she should have dyed her hair. She could have gone brown for the affair. It wouldn't have killed her. She'd been a blonde, after all, for Mariah's wedding so as not to shock a hundred impressionable Kansans.

But that had been for Mariah's wedding, because Sierra hadn't wanted to attract attention that should rightly have been her sister's. It had been right then to fade into the background.

Somehow, even though it might have made things easier, she couldn't bring herself to do it here. It would have felt like a copout. It would have seemed, even if only to her, that she wasn't being true to herself.

So her hair was still pretty purple—sort of more of a black cherry, actually—and she'd done it sleek and shining, then because they would be outdoors for a good part of it, she wore a broad-brimmed pink hat. Her dress was silk, purples and pinks, short and stunning, sleeveless with a high neckline. Very basic, yet very Sierra. Not as funky as some of her clothes, but not likely to turn up in the next issue of *Town and Country*, either.

It made her feel as if she could almost cope.

“They’re boarding,” Rhys came in to report. The guests, he meant. When they came on board, they would go through a sort of modified reception line, just Sierra and Dominic, her parents and Douglas.

“So everyone gets to meet the bride,” Douglas said cheerfully. “Won’t take long. Then you can move around and visit with people. Then dinner and dancing. You look wonderful, my dear.” He gave Sierra an encouraging smile and looked as if he actually meant it.

She smiled back, then put her hand on Dominic’s black tuxedo jacket sleeve and took a deep breath.

“You all right?” Dominic asked her. He sounded worried.

“Fine,” Sierra said briskly. She gave him her best whistling-in-the-dark grin, and made up her mind that she was telling the truth.

No one was rude to her face.

Of course they were all too proper for that, too well brought up, too genteel. Dominic knew they wouldn’t do anything so impolite as to say what they were thinking, nor would they be so obvious as to catch a glimpse of the bride, then turn and walk away.

But sometimes, out of the corner of his eye, he saw people looking askance. The women, of course, more than the men. He heard mutters. The occasional indrawn breath of astonishment followed, naturally, by disapproval.

He gritted his teeth, smiled politely, said all the appropriate things. And hoped Sierra didn’t hear.

She gave no sign that she did. She was as warm and friendly and engaging as she always was. She sparkled in public, like a jewel.

Costume jewelry, Dominic imagined most people would think, looking at her.

But it wasn’t true. Sierra was as deep and radiant as the finest diamond. Her beauty came from within, not from what she chose to wear.

“Whatever could he have been thinking?” he heard just then, the voice a carrying whisper almost right behind them. Dominic turned slightly to see one of his mother’s old bridge club members, Sylvia Ponsonby-Merrill, using her driving glasses to take another look at his bride.

“I really can’t imagine.” This voice was even more familiar. Younger. Mellifluous and carefully cultured. “I’m sure he *wasn’t* thinking,” she said.

It was Marjorie—she who'd demanded an engagement ring in return for her favors—disapproving now in honeyed tones. "Or," she added with a small laugh, "certainly not with his head!"

Sierra was speaking to Talitha Thomas, the widow of one of his father's oldest friends. Talitha was patting her hand and beaming up at her, and Sierra was smiling and clasping the old woman's hand. She didn't falter once, but all the same, Dominic was sure she heard the exchange between Sylvia and Marjorie.

He wondered if either of them could swim.

Then his father appeared and invited the two of them to admire the sunset from the top deck, and the conversation turned to other topics.

Sierra went right on talking to Talitha.

On her behalf, though, Dominic fumed.

At first it was awful.

Like the first day of school in kindergarten, when you knew hardly anybody, and no one wanted to know you.

But no one ever did, Sierra had discovered, if you didn't try to know them. So that's what she set out to do. Every person Dominic introduced her to was an interesting individual. And she made sure to show she understood that. Most of them responded politely and, if they were reserved at first, the majority, by the time she'd finished talking to them, responded with at least a little warmth.

A few, of course, did not.

She told herself she didn't care. For herself she did not. But she hated that they thought less of Dominic because of her.

Not all of them did.

Tally Thomas, for instance. What a delightful surprise to see Tally there. The sprightly octogenarian had been one of Sierra's first clients when she'd come to New York. Tally had been a regular at the little salon on Madison where Sierra had first found a job cutting hair, and one day when her regular stylist was ill, she'd made do with Sierra.

After that she'd insisted on Sierra always doing her hair.

She'd followed Sierra through three more salons until Sierra had told her she was going to go to Paris. Then Tally had given her a series of

French lessons. “So you don’t let them get the best of you,” she’d said, with a twinkle in her eye.

Sierra had loved the lessons and she hadn’t forgotten Tally’s kindness. Though she hadn’t seen Tally much since she’d come back and was working on photo shoots now, she was delighted to see her first real client.

Tally was equally thrilled to see her. “Who’d have thought it!” she’d said, clasping Sierra’s hands in her own. “Never would’ve dreamed one of Douglas’s boys would have such good sense!”

“Dominic’s brilliant,” Sierra had assured her, watching her husband out of the corner of her eye. He had stiffened at the voices of two women behind them, and what they were saying made Sierra stiffen, too, though she did her best to pretend she hadn’t heard.

They didn’t matter, she assured herself.

Only people like Tally mattered. Kind people. Loving people.

And, of course, Dominic.

“My secretary, Shyla,” Dominic was introducing her to now.

And Sierra put the other women out of her mind and took Shyla’s hand. “I’m so glad to meet you. How does Deirdre like her Yankees’ cap?”

Shyla laughed. They talked, compared notes on Dominic, and, Sierra was delighted to see, made him blush.

Then Mariah appeared and said, “It’s time to go sit down and eat.”

“You okay?” Dominic asked her.

And Sierra nodded. Yes, she was.

She’d said she was fine.

Then she disappeared.

They ate dinner, cut the cake, fed each other bites of it, and she was smiling and happy, then told him she needed to wash her hands, headed for the ladies’ room—and disappeared.

“You’re supposed to be dancing. The bride and groom lead out the dancing,” Rhys said into his ear. Dominic was pacing the deck. He’d been over all of them looking for her when she hadn’t reappeared. He’d seen everyone, smiled and shook hands and met some curious gazes, and he could hardly say he’d mislaid his bride, so he’d kept looking by himself.

But she didn’t seem to be anywhere!

“You and Mariah dance,” Dominic said now, brushing Rhys off.

“We’re not the bride and groom.”

“Well, pretend you are,” Dominic said through his teeth. “Sierra’s not here!”

“What the hell do you mean, not here? This is a boat, for God’s sake! Where could she be?”

“How the hell should I know? She went to the head and she never came back.”

“Maybe she’s still there.”

“It’s been half an hour!”

“Did you look?”

“Of course not. I didn’t go busting in. It’s not a unisex bathroom.”

“Did you ask?”

Dominic grunted. “You don’t go around asking for your lost bride.”

“Well, no, I never have,” Rhys said cheerfully, “but I’ve never lost mine.”

“Since you married her,” Dominic said pointedly. He wasn’t going to allow Rhys very much smugness. His brother had screwed things up pretty badly with Mariah before he’d come to his senses and begun to live happily ever after.

“Since then,” Rhys agreed. “Want me to ask?”

Dominic didn’t want anything of the sort, but it was better to have Rhys ask than to do it himself. “If you want,” he said offhandedly. “But don’t tell them I sent you!”

Rhys crossed his heart. “And hope to die,” he said piously.

“Just do it.” Dominic gave him a push toward the stairs. He followed Rhys down at a discreet distance, ready to look the other way while Rhys knocked on the ladies’ room door.

But before Rhys could do it, the door opened and three women came out, laughing and talking together like old friends.

Sylvia Ponsonby-Merrill, Marjorie, and Sierra.

Discreet distance and deliberate indifference forgotten, Dominic gaped at them while Rhys stepped back and let them pass.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Marjorie, face flushed, was saying to Sierra.

“Not a problem.” Sierra replied cheerfully. “The same thing happened to me at my friend Katie’s wedding. Only worse. My switch fell in the soup!”

Both the other women's eyes bugged, then all three burst out laughing, and Sylvia patted her hand and said, "I'll give some thought to that rinse you recommended. I've never thought of myself as a blonde." She looked absolutely delighted. "It's intriguing." She gave Dominic a cheerful smile and, as she slipped past him, said, "Lovely girl, your Sierra, Dominic. Trust you to find her."

His eyes met Marjorie's for just a moment as she followed Sylvia. "I like her, Dominic," she said.

So did he.

But he was a little dazed and confused about how she had managed to convert the enemy.

"Marjorie's switch came loose in the breeze when she went up on deck with your father," Sierra told him simply. "She was in despair when I went to wash my hands. She couldn't get it up and fixed again. Neither could Sylvia." She shrugged. "So I did."

"You helped—but they were the ones who—" Dominic stopped as Sierra took his hand in hers.

She smiled at him, both her hands warm as they wrapped around his and she looked into his eyes. "They're guests. And it's true what I told Sylvia." Her eyes simply sparkled. "She would look good as a blonde."

It was a beautiful night.

Magical.

The skyline of Manhattan twinkled in the distance as the sun went down and the moon rose. People laughed and ate and drank and chatted. Children played and whooped and clapped. The band played lilting romantic melodies.

And for the first time in weeks Sierra was back in Dominic's arms.

It was required, of course. They had a duty dance down by the band, and he held her close and she could rub her cheek against the starched white of his shirt or the soft black of his tuxedo jacket. She did just that, couldn't help herself. But, all too quickly, the piece ended and her father was claiming her, and then Douglas and Rhys and Nathan and Finn and Gib and seemingly an endless stream of men.

Lovely men. Charming men. Dashing men.

She hugged her father, thanked Douglas profusely, assured Rhys that everything was fine, enjoyed a few moments with Nathan who, wearing a borrowed suit of Dominic's, looked remarkably like him.

But Nathan wasn't him.

And she wanted him. Desperately.

What Dominic wanted she had no idea. He was dancing with an equal number of women. She kept her eyes open, watching for him, aware every moment where he was—even when he was on the far side of the dance floor. She saw him with her mother, with Mariah and Izzy and Chloe and Pammie. She even saw him dance once with Sylvia Ponsonby-Merrill.

She wanted him to dance again with her.

It reminded her of Rhys's and Mariah's wedding when she'd danced all night determinedly with other men, but had only had eyes for him.

The difference was, she hadn't danced with him first—or at all—that night, until the very end.

Then somehow they just happened to be standing near each other at the beginning of the last dance of the evening. And their gazes, which had been connecting and avoiding all night, met once more.

And this time neither had looked away.

"Dare you," Dominic had said gruffly, a muscle jumping in his jaw. He held out a hand.

And Sierra took it and felt the electricity jolt through her.

"You're on," she'd replied and stepped recklessly into his arms.

From that moment she was lost. She'd probably been lost from the first time she saw him, but she hadn't realized it then.

She was still lost in love with Dominic and she didn't know how, after tonight, she would be able to resist.

She stood now beside the staircase leading to the upper decks and watched the other couples dancing. She tried to find Dominic, but for once her radar failed her.

And then, quite suddenly, he was there.

Right next to her, his shoulder brushing hers, his fingers sliding in to lace with hers.

"Dare you." The gruff whisper sent a shiver right to the center of her.

She whipped her head around to see him there, a wry grin on his face and a reckless look in his eyes.

She swallowed. "Dare me to what?"

“Dance with me.” He took her hand, but he didn’t lead her to the dance floor. Instead he drew her up the steps, not to the next deck or the next, but to the very top open air deck where there was no one else, just the music drifting up to them. And then he shut the door.

He held out his arms. “Dance?”

Sierra blinked. “Oh, yes. Yes, please.” And she stepped into them again, felt one slide around her back and draw her close, felt the other close around her right hand, tucking it against his chest. Her hat bumped his nose.

He laughed. It was a strained laugh, rough with desire. And when she took the hat off and tossed it away, he wrapped his arms around her and they watched it float on the night sky into the water below.

Then he turned her in his arms and they danced. Alone. Together.

Then Dominic said, “I wonder if maybe we ought to go on a honeymoon after all.”

Sierra’s heart leapt. She stepped back and looked up at him, trying to see his heart in his eyes. But there were too many shadows. The night was too dark.

But not too dark to hope.

CHAPTER NINE

“A HONEYMOON?” Douglas looked surprised. He stopped fidgeting in Dominic’s office and regarded his son with curiosity. “Where?”

“I don’t know where,” Dominic said irritably. He just knew it was a good idea. If he and Sierra were ever going to make anything out of this marriage, they needed some time alone together, to concentrate on each other.

He didn’t stop to think when he’d decided that it was necessary that he and Sierra make something out of their marriage—something more than he’d originally thought, at least. He just knew it was. He knew she’d been right.

He only hoped he hadn’t waited too long and blown it.

He didn’t think he had. She had looked surprised but happy when he’d suggested it last night, which was why he was in the office on Saturday. He was trying to get things squared away, sorted out, finished up.

“You really want to put the past behind you and move on?” Nathan asked. He was lounging on the sofa, leafing through a magazine while he waited for their father. The two of them were going out to the old family home on Long Island to go fishing. They’d stopped by Dominic’s place to see if he and Sierra wanted to go. Sierra had told them he was at the office.

“Idiot,” Douglas had said when he’d first burst in. “What are you doing here, leaving your wife home on the Saturday after your wedding reception? You’ll lose that girl, Dominic!”

“I’m trying *not* to lose her, damn it!” Dominic had retorted, jabbing a pencil in his father’s direction. “I’m trying to get things sorted out so I can take her away from here.”

“You should go to our place in the Bahamas,” Nathan said.

Dominic snapped the pencil in half. He glared at his brother. “That’s the stupidest damn suggestion I ever heard! Take her where I got *jilted* last time?”

“Have you ever been back?” Nathan asked him.

Dominic raked a hand through his hair. “Hell, no. And why should I have?”

Nathan shrugged. "To get over it?"

Dominic slammed his hand on the desk. "I am over it!"

"I can tell," Nathan murmured. He got up and paced the room, then tossed the magazine onto the coffee table, then glanced at his watch. "Come on, Dad. He's not going with us, and I want to get some fishing in. I'm only going to be here a week, then it's off to Antarctica."

"Right," Douglas said. He hoisted himself out of his chair, then regarded his son across Dominic's wide desk. "The honeymoon is a good idea." He turned and started for the door, then stopped and looked back. "The Bahamas is a good idea, too. For a marriage to work, it needs a clean slate."

She'd only been to the Bahamas twice.

In all the traveling she'd done on photo shoots all over the world, she'd only managed a week in Nassau.

"Nassau?" she'd said eagerly when he mentioned the Bahamas.

Dominic had shaken his head. "We have a place on one of the out islands. There's a small town, a fishing harbor, and a few houses scattered along the windward beach. Three miles of pink sand and usually deserted."

"Sounds heavenly," Sierra had said.

And now she knew it was.

They'd flown to the closest island airport, then had taken a water taxi to the island. It was called Pelican Cay, and it was picture-book beautiful, with rows of pastel-colored houses climbing higgledy-piggledy up the hill from the harbor, and narrow asphalt roads that wound through town and then in two or three directions out of town into what looked almost like jungle.

One of the islanders met their water taxi, an old man named Maurice, who drove a purple Jeep and gave her a deep courtly bow when he took her suitcase and helped her in.

"My car," he said, "she matches your hair." And he beamed broadly when Sierra grinned.

Dominic, for his part, was quiet. He seemed nervous, wary, a little gunshy, Sierra would have said. She watched him openly as he got into the front seat next to Maurice. When he turned his head, she noted a tight line at the corner of his mouth and the fact that he hadn't taken off his dark glasses since they'd set foot off the plane.

“It’s lovely,” she said, reaching up to put a hand on his shoulder and when he touched it automatically, she laced her fingers through his. “Thank you for bringing me.”

“My pleasure,” Dominic said. But he certainly didn’t sound like it.

“It be our pleasure to have you back, Mr. Wolfe,” Maurice said as they bounced through the narrow streets. “We miss you.”

Dominic’s mouth tightened even further. But at last he nodded at Maurice. “Thank you.”

Maurice smiled again with great good cheer. “But now you here, it be like you never left. Only good things. And you enjoy it!” He slanted Dominic a sidelong look. “This be your honeymoon, yes?”

Dominic hesitated, then nodded. “Yes.”

Maurice laughed, delighted. “You definitely enjoy then! My Estelle, she give you plenty of privacy. Estelle be the cook an’ housekeeper,” he told Sierra. “I tell everyone to give you plenty of privacy.” He laughed again. And Sierra was enchanted to see Dominic blush.

“We’ve been married a while,” he said stiffly. “We’re hardly newlyweds.”

“Hardly,” Sierra agreed, but then the imp within her made her say, “But we’ll enjoy all that privacy, you can be sure!”

She and Maurice laughed together. Dominic retreated behind his sunglasses, and Sierra wondered if she’d made a mistake by teasing him.

But she knew she had to treat him as she’d always treated him. They were having a honeymoon. They were getting to know each other. They needed to be who they really were for this to work. They couldn’t try to pretend.

They had to be themselves.

Nathan, not for the first time, had been wrong.

Why the hell had he listened to his stupid younger brother? What the hell did Nathan know about being married or making things work with your wife?

Nathan wasn’t married, never had been!

He was as footloose and free as a bird. He’d never even been engaged, never been in love, never even looked at the same woman twice as far as Dominic knew.

So where did he get off telling Dominic what to do?
And why the hell had he listened?

Because in New York City in a steel-and-glass building where he was strong and clever and in control, it had made a certain sort of cockeyed sense.

And so he'd finished up his work and gone home to tell Sierra he'd made arrangements for them to fly to the Bahamas. He'd made it sound enticing, charming, delightful—the perfect honeymoon paradise.

But the closer they'd got, the more he'd choked.

The sight of the town as they'd crossed the water had brought it all back. All the memories. All the hopes. All the disaster.

And then Maurice had been there to meet them, which had been his father's doing, no doubt. Maurice, who had come to him with the news that Carin wasn't there. Maurice, who had patted his arm and said sadly, "I think maybe she panic, you know?" Maurice who had then gone and told his father who had begun to send people on their way.

Maurice knew.

Dominic didn't know if Sierra knew anything or not.

He didn't see how she couldn't. He hadn't said anything, but Mariah probably had. Mariah, married to Rhys, would know something. Rhys would have told his wife about the place in the Bahamas. He'd even brought her and the children down here a couple of months ago.

"It was therapeutic," he'd told Dominic after, because he'd had his own ghosts to lay to rest. "You ought to go back sometime."

But Dominic hadn't wanted any therapy like that.

Not then. He didn't now, either, suddenly. He only wanted to leave.

But it was too late.

Sierra loved it. He could see it on her face. She didn't wear sunglasses often, even when he thought she ought to. So her emotions were transparent. She was enthusiastic about everything. She looked around eagerly, pointing out this, asking about that.

And then, when Maurice turned down the long winding lane that led to the Wolfe house, she leaned forward eagerly, and exclaimed with delight when the cathedral of jungly trees opened onto an island garden and a low-slung peach-coloured house, with trailing dark burgundy bougainvillea all over one wall.

“This is it? It’s beautiful. Gorgeous.” And then she caught sight, beyond the house, of the beach and the turquoise water of the Caribbean. “Oh my! Oh, how wonderful!” And she leaned forward and threw her arms around Dominic’s shoulders and drew him back into a hug.

It was oddly settling, the feel of her arms around him, the whisper of her breath against his neck, the sound of her voice in his ear. She was Sierra, not Carin.

This was now. Not then.

They were married already.

They only had to make it work.

Maurice stopped the Jeep and got out. Dominic climbed out, then helped Sierra out, too. She stood, floppy hat clapped on her head with one hand, and turned in a circle admiring it all—the mangrove jungle, the shallow fishpond and stone patio of the garden, the white trellises with their bougainvilleas and the stands of multicolored oleander, the house, the hammock, the sand, the sea.

“I love it,” she said, and she put her arms around him and hugged him again.

And one by one, as he stood holding Sierra in his arms, Dominic’s fears, his memories, his humiliations seemed to recede.

It was hard to remember Carin in the presence of as vibrant a woman as his wife. It was hard to think of the wedding that hadn’t happened, when Sierra still talked happily about the one that had—and the reception his father had given them.

It was hard to dwell on the past, when the present was so much more fun.

He hadn’t considered that coming back to Pelican Cay would be fun. He’d thought about it seriously, determinedly, with earnestness and resolution. He was going to banish the past and make a concerted effort to get to know this amazing woman he’d wed.

But it hadn’t really sounded like much fun.

But then, he’d forgotten what life with Sierra—when she wasn’t trying to avoid him—could be like.

They barely got in the house and she said, “Why don’t we go swimming?”

“Now?” He was surprised, then willing. He had no reason to want to remain in the house, after all. He just remembered standing here that

morning, waiting for Carin—and Carin never coming.

“Swimming? Sure,” he said. “Why not?”

She changed into a deep purple maillot, slathered her fair skin with sunblock, and rubbed something oily on her hair. “So I don’t turn the ocean purple,” she explained, then grinned. “I’m kidding. It’s to protect my hair.”

“Oh. Right.” He grinned, too. But his mind was less on her hair than on her nearly bare body which he hadn’t seen in far too long. Something he should probably not be thinking about right now. “Go ahead. I’ll get my trunks on and join you.”

She was waiting on the deck overlooking the beach when he came out a few minutes later. She was leaning forward, hands braced on the railing as she looked out down the beach which was empty as far as the eye could see.

“This is amazing,” she said. “This is paradise and it’s deserted. This has to be the world’s best kept secret.”

“We know it’s here,” Dominic said smiling at her, holding out his hand to her.

She put hers in his. “Then let’s keep it just for us.”

Once they were down on the beach she ran toward the water and he ran with her, remembering he’d probably been a teenager last time he had actually run into the surf.

It felt good. Liberating.

Then she let go of his hand and dove beneath a small wave, and he dove after her. They both came up sputtering and laughing.

“It’s like a warm bath!” Sierra exclaimed. “It’s heavenly.” And she ducked again and came up, purple hair streaming as she smiled at him so eager and alive that his heart seemed to lodge in his throat.

They swam and played in the water. Then they came out and flopped, exhausted, on the pale pink coral sand beach. Lying side by side on their stomachs, breathing hard, they stared at each other. Then Sierra smiled. And he smiled back.

He didn’t know how long they lay there. Sierra’s eyes closed and he thought she had fallen asleep. So he got up and spread a light sheet over her to protect her from the sun, even though it was fairly late in the day. She smiled slightly, but she didn’t open her eyes.

He just sat and watched. Traced the lines of her features, memorized them. Marveled at how young and innocent she looked. With the purple hair

she reminded him of some sleek sea creature, a mermaid, perhaps. An enchantress.

From the very first she had enchanted him. Bewitched him. Got past his very well-developed guard. And now he couldn't imagine life without her.

He wished she would tell him again that she loved him. She hadn't said it since the night they'd fought.

Maybe he should tell her.

But he couldn't. He hadn't said the words in years. And every time he thought them, they stuck in his throat.

She was still sleeping by the time the sun went down behind the house, casting the beach in shadow. Darkness came early in the tropics. And as the sun fell a light breeze sprang up and blew in from the water.

Dominic touched her shoulder. "Sierra?"

Slowly her eyes opened and she smiled. "Hey." The way she looked at him made his toes curl with anticipation. He wanted her now with a depth he couldn't have guessed at when he married her. It was so much stronger than anything he'd ever felt before.

"Ready for some of that dinner Estelle left us?"

She hauled herself to a kneeling position. "Sure. I'm starved." She brushed off the sand from the front of her swimsuit. "I must have fallen asleep. Sorry. You must have been bored. You could have left me. Got some work done. Or—"

"No."

She looked surprised. "No?" She said the word almost hopefully.

Slowly Dominic shook his head. "No. This is our honeymoon, remember. It's just for the two of us."

The smile that lit her face then took his breath away. She stood up and drew a deep breath, then looked all around before her gaze came back to him. She held out her hands to him and went up on her toes to touch her lips to his.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"My pleasure," he replied.

And this time he meant it.

Late that night he realized as he was shutting out the light and preparing to go to bed with her, that he'd never once thought of Carin. He'd never remembered the last time he'd been here.

It was time.

All day she'd been waiting. No, actually longer. She'd been waiting since Dominic had suggested they have a honeymoon after all, since he'd decided to see her as more than a mere bed partner.

She didn't know if he loved her yet. But she thought there was a chance now that he might. They'd had a wonderful day on the beach, at dinner on the deck, then after, walking along the sand once more.

And now it was time.

Time to go to bed with Dominic again.

To make love with him for the first time.

There had been love in it before, subliminally, subconsciously—at least on her part. But it hadn't been like this. It hadn't happened with this need, with this depth, with this commitment.

She felt awkward as she prepared for bed now. There was none of the silly spontaneity of their earlier couplings. None of the frenzied need with which they'd wrestled each other down. He wasn't even in the room. He'd gone to shut out the light in the living room while she changed into the soft white gown that Mariah had given her yesterday afternoon.

"I know this isn't a traditional honeymoon," her sister had said. "But it means just as much—maybe more. You need to have a few trappings to make it special, besides Dominic."

The gown was special. Almost virginal in its simplicity.

Sierra felt oddly virginal. And she supposed emotionally she was. She'd never made love like this before.

She settled on the bed and lay waiting, hoping, praying that Dominic would feel as committed as she did, would want things to work as badly as she did.

And then he was standing in the doorway, looking at her, his eyes hooded, his expression unreadable. He wore only a pair of boxer shorts, and she could see that his chest and legs were slightly reddened from the sun. His normally neat hair was salt-stiffened and tousled. He looked gorgeous—strong and muscled and one-hundred percent virile male. All Sierra's hormones went on alert.

The need for him was as great as it had ever been, the depth of feeling, the seriousness of loving this man forever was still there. But as Sierra smiled, she suddenly didn't feel awkward at all.

"No tie?" she teased.

And Dominic's brooding expression faded. A smile touched the corners of his beautiful mouth. "I didn't even bring one," he said. "Damn it."

Sierra held out her arms to him. "Don't worry. I think we can improvise."

They improvised.

They kissed and stroked and touched and licked. Even though he'd showered earlier, she could still taste a slight saltiness on his skin as she nibbled his shoulder. And she gave a delicate shudder as he nibbled hers, then moved up her neck and along her jaw before covering her lips in a soul-searing kiss.

She drew him down over her and splayed her hands across the breadth of his back. His skin was warm to the touch and smooth. With her fingers she walked the ridge of his spine, then pressed her fists alongside it and felt his muscles bunch and flex.

Then he rose to kneel between her legs and part her soft flesh. His touch made her shiver with longing, and she reached for him. "Now, Dominic. Please."

There was no teasing tonight. No wrestling. Only hunger and passion and the need to become one as fully and quickly as possible.

He nodded and slid inside her, filling her, making her whole. It was as if some part of her that had been missing was suddenly there, found, home. The wonder of it made Sierra's breath catch in her throat.

She shifted to take him more deeply within and heard him draw a quick breath. "Dominic?" she whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Am I all right?" His tone was incredulous. "I've never been better in my life." And she heard a ragged little catch in his voice this time.

And then he began to move. Slowly, languorously, lazily almost. At first. But then there was a subtle change, an increase in tempo, a tension in his body. She could feel it just as she felt the change in her own. She locked her heels against the backs of his thighs as she rocked to meet him.

He drove down one last time, then stopped dead, quivering violently, shattering in her arms. Lost. Found. Shattered.

And, Sierra hoped desperately as her own body splintered, made whole.

Singing in the rain.

That's what they did the next morning. She actually got him down to the beach in the middle of a downpour—"We're going swimming anyway! Who cares at what point we get wet?"—and danced along the sand.

He didn't dance. But he felt like it. His heart danced. And his soul. And every other part of him but his feet.

And even they did a couple of quick shuffles when he was sure no one—except maybe Sierra—was looking.

"You're a wonderful dancer," she protested when he wouldn't. "You danced on the *Sloop John B.*" That's what she was calling the yacht now.

"But there was music then," he argued.

"There's music now. In my heart." She grabbed him and pressed his head against her breasts. "Can't you hear it?"

He heard enough music of his own. He kissed the tip of her breast and then grabbed her up into his arms and ran with her into the ocean, then sank down, submerging them both.

They came up sputtering and laughing. And then they teased and tickled and wrestled and played. And when the rain stopped they came out and lay on the damp sand, breathless and hungry for each other.

"I could make love to you right here," he muttered.

"If we didn't have an audience." Sierra nodded her head in the direction of a couple of little girls down the beach perhaps quarter of a mile away.

"They'd never know."

"They won't know," Sierra said, hopping to her feet and pulling him up with her. "Because we're going back up to the house to do it. I'm not sharing you, even voyeuristically, with anyone."

That was fine with him. Dominic had no desire to be shared. They went back to the house and made love in the shower, then in the bed, and barely managed to be dressed and respectable when Estelle arrived to clean.

"You sleepyheads," she admonished gently.

"Oh," Sierra said brightly, "Dominic's been up for hours." And then she giggled, and he felt his face flush.

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her hard. "I'll take this hussy out of your way," he promised Estelle. "Come on. We'll go back down on the beach."

They didn't swim this time. They sat on the sand and dug tunnels and made sand castles because that was what he and his brothers had done here years ago and it seemed right that he do it with Sierra. She was family now.

“We can do this with our kids,” he said.

She looked up from digging a tunnel and her eyes were wide. “Kids?” she said in barely more than a whisper.

“You want kids, don’t you? I figured you did. You’re good with kids. Frankie. Stephen and Lizzie.”

“I’d love to have kids.” She looked like he’d given her the moon. “I wasn’t sure you...” Her voice died out and she shrugged a little awkwardly.

“I want kids,” he said firmly. “I would always want them. No matter what. I couldn’t believe Rhys turning his back on Mariah when she was carrying his child.”

“I remember you didn’t fight too hard to keep his whereabouts secret,” she said with a mischievous grin.

Dominic remembered that day, too, remembered being astonished when this purple-haired virago had invaded his office and threatened his manhood unless he surrendered his brother’s address.

“I wouldn’t have given it to you,” he said, “despite the turn-on, if I hadn’t thought you were right. A man has a responsibility to his child. And to its mother.”

Their gazes met across the castle. Then they were kneeling right in the middle of it, kissing with a desperation that might have led them to be a public spectacle if Sierra hadn’t pulled back suddenly.

Dominic groaned, needing her now.

“I wonder if Estelle has finished in the house,” Sierra said raggedly.

He hauled her to her feet. “She’s done, whether she’s finished or not.”

They walked into the small harborside village that afternoon because Sierra insisted. “I know honeymooners are supposed to spend every minute in bed. But I do want to see where I’ve been.”

“In bed,” Dominic said, grinning. “Why does it matter where you’ve been?”

“It does,” Sierra insisted. “We’ll have a good time. We can pick up some groceries, and stop and tell Estelle we’ll cook for ourselves tonight.”

“And then she won’t come back and...” Dominic could already see possibilities in that.

“And I’d like to find something to take home to remember this by. A souvenir.”

“You might already have a souvenir,” he said with a grin and a glance at her midriff.

The heat of his gaze made Sierra warm all over. And the thought that he, too, wanted a child thrilled her to bits.

If he would only say, “I love you.”

She stopped herself even as she thought it. She knew of other men who couldn’t say the words. Her own father, according to her mother, had barely managed to get them past his lips half a dozen times in his life.

Which was six more than Dominic had, she thought. But then she slipped her hand in his and leaned up to kiss him.

And he kissed her back with such fervor that she wondered how she could ever doubt.

He would never have told her it at all if she hadn’t asked.

They’d gone out fishing that afternoon with Maurice’s brother, Victor, and Victor had said, “Ain’t seen you in years an’ years. Not since your weddin’ what wasn’t.” And then he’d clamped his mouth shut and seconds later when he opened it again, everything he’d said had to do with fishing.

But that night when they were in bed, lights out, hunger sated, sleepy and warm in each other’s arms, Sierra asked, “Will you tell me about it?”

He knew she wouldn’t press. It wasn’t so much of a question as an invitation, and though he would never have guessed he would take her up on it, now that she was asking, he did.

“It was the year after my mother died,” he told her and felt the familiar lump lodge in his throat. “I was twenty-four. Finished with my M.B.A. I’d been working for Wolfe’s since high school in one capacity or another, being groomed to take over, my dad directing every move. And that year I’d moved out of the subsidiary offices to New York. I was his right-hand man—and loving every minute of it. And he was missing my mother. We both were. Rhys had Sarah and Nathan had his photography and was gone a lot. But the two of us were sort of...lost, I guess. Him for sure, and I just wanted to be like him. And then he said, ‘You ought to get married.’”

He rolled onto his back, folded his arms under his head and stared at the ceiling fan that moved lazily in the moonlit room. “Just like that. And I agreed.”

He remembered it so well, how sure he'd been that his dad was right, that it was time to get married, even when he didn't even have a woman in mind.

"A few days later he told me that one of the men he did business with had this gorgeous daughter. 'You ought to see her,' he said. Then, 'You ought to marry her.' He was joking then, but I guess the seed was planted." He sighed, remembering how foolish he'd been, thinking it was going to be that easy.

"So I got introduced. And she was very pretty."

"How pretty?" Sierra asked in a small voice. She was lying against him, one leg over his, her head nestled in the curve of his shoulder. Her words stirred the hair on his chest. Her apprehensiveness stirred his heart.

"Pretty enough," he said because he had to be honest. But she'd never made his heart kick over. She'd never made his pulse race. She'd been lovely in a grave, gentle way. Nowhere near as vibrant as Sierra. "Not like you," he said. "She was a student, a senior in college. An art major. At some Midwestern school. I can't even remember which. Doesn't matter. She was in New York for the summer, doing something at one of the museums, an internship or something. And we started dating."

It had been so pleasant. So simple to sweep her off her feet, to take her nice places, to invite her out to the family home on Long Island, to take her sailing. She'd been enchanted, had loved it all. And her fresh-faced innocence and enthusiasm had charmed him, too.

When his father had approved, had said the words that made Carin the perfect mate—"You know, she reminds me of your mother"—it had been the easiest thing in the world to propose.

He hadn't been surprised when she'd accepted. "And then we decided to get married."

Sierra raised her head briefly. "Just like that?"

"We had spent more time together than you and I did," Dominic reminded her.

She lay her head back down and he felt her nod. Her fingers played lightly across his chest. "Go on."

"She loved to go sailing, so I thought coming down here would be a great idea. We could get married here, I told her. And she thought that sounded wonderful. She didn't have a mother to plan a big wedding back in Wisconsin. Her mother and father had split years before and Carin had

stayed with her father. So we just decided that Bahamas was it. I had work to do, so she came down early. One of us had to be in residence three weeks to qualify for the marriage license. So she came and stayed in the house. Then the week of the wedding everybody else came. Except me. I was putting together a deal and I didn't get here until the night before."

He stopped, swallowed, wondering again as he had so many times if that had been the problem. If he'd got here sooner would she have talked to him? Would she have told him what she couldn't tell anyone else?

"I didn't get here until the rehearsal was starting. And that was a crock anyway because her bridesmaid wasn't flying in until morning, and Nathan, who was supposed to be my best man, got a call from some magazine and took off, leaving Rhys in his place. I should have realized things weren't going to work."

But he hadn't. He'd gone through the rehearsal in a daze. He'd been exhausted, coming down with a cold, and short-tempered when anyone talked to him.

Including Carin.

Not that Carin ever said much. She'd asked him how he was, he remembered that. And he'd growled something about just being glad when the whole thing was over with.

He'd meant glad to be married.

He'd given her a chaste kiss on the forehead so he wouldn't give her his cold. "I barely spoke to her," he told Sierra now. "Except to tell her to get a good night's sleep." And he remembered mustering a grin that had promised she wouldn't be getting one on their wedding night.

"And then I said, 'See you in the morning.' But I didn't." He could still remember all the preparations, the last-minute things that needed to be done before he was left to stand by Rhys in the garden near the trellis of bougainvillea and wait for his bride. He'd stood still for the first time that morning, glad to have a chance to catch his breath.

And then he'd looked toward the house and waited for Carin.

He'd waited and waited.

The guests had waited, too. At first quietly, then with increasing murmurs and head turning.

Rhys had grinned and said, "Don't suppose she's ditched you, do you?"

Dominic had snorted then. But within moments it became increasingly clear that she had. Her father had appeared on the deck looking distraught.

His own father had looked irritated, then furious. He'd glared at Dominic, then looked at Rhys and jerked his head for his youngest son to join him.

"Maybe she's sick," Rhys had suggested. "Nerves." And he'd hurried off to talk to their dad.

When he came back a few minutes later he didn't have to tell Dominic what had happened.

"She was gone," he told Sierra now, his voice flat. "Packed up in the middle of the night sometime and skipped out." His fingers curled into fists against the sheet.

"Oh, Dominic." Her voice comforted him. Her lips caressed him. "Oh, my dear." And then she moved right on top of him, as if she could shield him from the pain, from the memory, from the humiliation he felt at having to clear his throat and tell the assembled guests that there would be no wedding that morning.

And oddly, it helped.

The warmth of her body on his soothed ragged feelings. The gentleness of her touch healed a dozen years of pain.

It wasn't losing Carin that had mattered.

It was feeling unlovable.

Sierra took those feelings away. She loved him. She'd said so. And with her every act she reconfirmed those words. He rested his chin against the top of her head. His legs tangled with hers, and his arms came around her and held her fast.

"Oh, my love," she whispered.

And Dominic, throat tight and aching with love for her, could only manage two words, "Oh, yes."

CHAPTER TEN

THE phone woke them.

The morning sun spilled in the window and Sierra squinted at it as she untangled herself from Dominic who cursed and reached for the ringing cellular phone on the bedside table.

There was no phone line to the house. The only connection with the outside world was the cell phone Douglas had insisted Dominic take.

"You're head of the company now. You have responsibilities. But I won't call unless it's an emergency," he'd promised.

Now Dominic grabbed it and muttered sleepily into it, "This had better be good."

A minute later he was sitting up, raking his fingers through his spiky hair, saying, "You're sure? But that's impossible. No, you're right it's not impossible. Oh, hell. All right. Let me talk to Sierra and I'll get back to you."

He hung up and turned to face her, his expression rueful. "I thought I had it all taken care of, really I did. But Sorensen in Denmark is suddenly on the market and we've been trying to buy them for two years. Dad thinks they'd rather go to us than to anyone else, but they want to talk to the boss."

"You," Sierra filled in.

Dominic nodded reluctantly.

"So talk to them." She scrunched back up against the pillows. "You don't have to dance attendance on me every second."

"I want to dance attendance on you. I want to crawl back in bed and—"

"But you can't," Sierra said. "Not if you want Sorensen. Denmark is six hours ahead of us. The day is half over."

"You don't mind?"

"Go ahead," she told him. "It doesn't matter. I can go walk on the beach or go into town and find a souvenir...just in case I don't have another one already," she added with a grin. "I love you."

He flashed her a grin and gave her a quick kiss. Then he punched in a number on his cell phone.

Sierra took a leisurely shower, ate some yogurt and a banana, then drank a cup of tea. She could hear Dominic in the other room talking on the phone. She poured him a cup, took it in and set it beside him. She got a fleeting smile in return and an even more fleeting kiss on her fingers before he had to scrabble for a pen and jot down some figures.

“I’m going for a walk,” she mouthed. “Back in a while.”

He looked hassled and shrugged, then nodded. “Swim later?” he mouthed back. “Then bed?”

She grinned and nodded.

He said into the phone, “Run that past me again,” and started writing furiously.

Sierra left him to it. She pulled on one of his T-shirts over her bathing suit, then stepped into a pair of shorts and slapped a broad-brimmed straw hat on her head to protect her hair and her face from the fierce tropical sun. Then she wagged her fingers at him and headed down the stairs to the beach.

Pelican Cay really was the closest thing to paradise she could imagine.

It was the perfect place to have come for a honeymoon. And the honeymoon was everything she’d hoped it would be.

They’d grown closer here. They’d shared stories of their childhoods. He’d told her about the adventures he’d had here and on Long Island with Rhys and Nathan and she’d told him about growing up in Kansas with Mariah. They’d laughed and played and held hands and kissed. They’d walked miles on the pink sand beach and they’d dug tunnels and built sand castles.

“We’ll have to bring Pam and Frankie down here sometime,” he’d said yesterday. “A budding architect should build a few sand castles in his youth.”

And Sierra had smiled at the thought. “Yes, that would be wonderful.” And she’d been pleased, not just because Frankie would love it, but because it meant that Dominic had accepted her friends as his.

Frankie would love it, she thought as she looked around at the nearly deserted beach, at the softly breaking waves, and the lumpy remains of yesterday’s castles. She and Dominic hadn’t brought a camera, but now she thought she would walk along the beach until she came to the road to town, then go to the little island drug store where yesterday she had seen a rack of disposable cameras.

She could send Frankie a postcard and take a few photos, and maybe she could find a souvenir for the apartment, something that would bring back this paradise every time they looked at it.

She could get there and back by lunchtime. If Dominic was done with his calls by then, they could spend the afternoon at the beach—or in bed. As long as they spent it together, it didn't matter to her.

She started out along the beach, but the weather was so warm and muggy that she decided a quick dip wouldn't be amiss. She stripped off Dominic's shirt and her shorts, set the floppy hat on top of them, then plunged into the surf. She didn't stay in long, just long enough to cool off, then came back out, hair dripping, plastered sleekly to the back of her head.

Three children stood watching her with wide eyes. They were about ten or so, a little older than Frankie, she thought. A girl and two boys. The boys stared at her in wide-eyed speechlessness.

The girl said what they were apparently all thinking. "Are you a mermaid?" she asked. She was staring at Sierra's purple hair.

"Only half," Sierra said with a grin. "Just the top. Look—" She did a little hop. "No fin."

They all laughed then and, realizing that she was as human as everyone else and just a visitor, they looked embarrassed.

"People have called me worse things," Sierra assured them. "Look, I'm just visiting. My husband—" she faltered a moment over the word, then said it again with pleasure and determination "—my husband and I are spending our honeymoon here. I want to take home a souvenir. Got any suggestions?"

"A T-shirt," one of the boys said promptly.

The girl and the other boy groaned.

"Everybody takes home T-shirts, Marcus," the other boy said.

"You got a better idea?" the boy called Marcus challenged.

"You could get a stuffed fish," the second boy said. "Go fishin' an' my grandpa will mount you a fish."

Sierra smiled. "Maybe another time. I think I want something besides a stuffed fish for this occasion."

"You could buy one of my mother's paintings," the girl suggested.

Now that sounded like a possibility. "Your mother paints scenes of the islands?" she asked the girl.

Long dark braids bobbed as the girl nodded. “Beautiful paintings. Want to see? She has a shop in the village.”

“Why not?” Sierra said. She couldn’t carry a painting back along the beach. But maybe she would find something perfect that they could pick up just before they left or could have mailed—if they were any good.

The girl, whose name was Lacey, was eleven. She had been born on the island. She painted, too, just like her mother. And someday she was going to be famous and go to New York and have a showing in a gallery there. She told Sierra this as they walked up the road toward the village. The boys had dropped out of the expedition, choosing to head for the fishing dock. Lacey talked nonstop. The boys weren’t missed.

“Have you been to New York?” Sierra asked her.

Dark braids swung back and forth as she shook her head no. “But my mother has.”

“Has your mother had shows there?” Sierra asked. She wondered if she might know the woman. She got invited to a lot of gallery openings by people whose hair she did. Sometimes they were multi-person shows. Wouldn’t it be amazing to meet someone here whom she’d seen in New York? There had been a woman last winter...

What was her name?

Sierra tried to remember what she looked like. She’d been dark like Lacey. And Lacey did look oddly familiar.

“It’s right here,” Lacey said, leading Sierra up the steps to a small bright blue cottage with white shutters. It had a narrow front porch on which several island scenes were displayed on easels. They were primitives—bright bold colors and broad strokes—the sand a little pinker, the sky a little bluer, the houses a little brighter. But yes, it was Pelican Cay.

Lacey’s mother had captured its heart.

And she captured Sierra’s, too. She knew at once that one of those paintings would be the perfect souvenir.

“Come on in,” Lacey said, pushing open the door. “Mommy! I brought you a customer!”

The inside of the small shop was as welcoming as the outside—natural wood walls held similar scenes from various points on Pelican Cay. Overhead a ceiling fan whirled around, making a shell wind chime by the door tinkle softly.

A woman pushed aside the bamboo curtain that separated the showroom from the back room and came out, smiling and shaking her head. "Lacey, when are you going to learn to be a little more tactful."

Lacey's mother was fairer than her daughter. She looked to be in her early thirties, with high cheekbones and a slender nose and long, loose honey-colored hair that Sierra would have loved to braid.

"Hi," she said, and offered Sierra a paint-spattered hand. "Paint's dry, I promise. It just doesn't come off. Nice to meet you. I'm Carin Campbell."

The thing about paradise was that it didn't last.

You couldn't expect it to. Seven days. That was pretty much it. If Adam and Eve had only got a week, what right did Sierra have to expect more?

She didn't.

And she didn't buy a painting, either, though they were lovely evocative pieces which captured the spirit and the beauty of Pelican Cay. Someday maybe she'd wish she had one—to remember.

Now all she wanted to do was forget.

She couldn't, of course. She had things to do.

Over the buzzing in her brain, she thought she'd managed to converse politely with the woman who had once left Dominic at the altar. She thought she'd said all the proper noncommittal things about not being able to quite make up her mind and wanting a while to think about it, and certainly being glad to have met her.

And Carin had said cheerfully, "Don't feel obliged. Just because Lacey is a hard sell, that doesn't mean you have to come back and buy one."

Sierra couldn't answer that. She managed a wan desperate smile, then let herself back out into the street.

The midday sun beat down on her, and she told herself it was the sun that was making her head buzz and her brain feel fried.

But it wasn't.

It was realizing why Lacey looked familiar.

It had nothing to do with the artist at the gallery opening she'd attended. It had everything to do with her having Dominic's dark hair and deep blue eyes.

Her features were her mother's. She had Carin's nose and Carin's generous mouth. But the hair color was exactly Dominic's. And thinking

back, Sierra realized that when the little girl tipped her head a certain way, she had the Wolfe profile.

Dominic had a daughter.

And he didn't even know.

She leaned against the porch railing of the grocery store and the man at the counter inside looked out curiously. "You be all right, Miss?"

Sierra nodded. "Yes," she said faintly. "I'll be fine."

Someday. Years from now.

She remembered yesterday on the beach, when they'd talked about having children. She remembered Dominic saying, "*I want kids. I would always want them. No matter what. I couldn't believe Rhys turning his back on Mariah when she was carrying his child.*"

And she knew he would want Lacey.

She knew he would want Carin.

She'd heard the pain in his voice last night when he'd told her about Carin running away, about losing her—his first love.

Maybe, she thought sadly, his only love.

Because as much as she'd wished he'd said those words to her, he never had. He'd given her his body. But she could only guess that he'd given her his heart.

There was always the chance she'd guessed wrong.

And even if she hadn't—even if he had come to feel something for her—it was nothing compared to what he would feel for Carin once he knew she was the mother of his child.

"He might hate her," she told herself. He might be so angry that she kept Lacey from him for all these years that he'd want nothing to do with her. And for a split second she felt a stab of hope.

But then reality settled in—and reality told her that no matter how Dominic felt about Carin, they would have so many issues to settle that Sierra would only be in the way.

She drew a deep breath and started back toward the house. And on the way she tried to find the courage to do what she had to do.

He was still on the phone when she got there, but the minute he saw her coming up the steps he said something to whoever he was talking to and put the phone down, then got up and came to meet her, an eager smile—a lover's smile—on his face.

And Sierra took a deep breath and, eyes brimming, she said the words she'd rehearsed for the last mile.

"I think we should get a divorce."

He'd been dying for her to get back. He'd been sick to death of all this Sorensen stuff, he'd done his best to sort through it, all the while keeping an eye on the path from the beach where he'd catch his first glimpse of Sierra.

And the minute he saw her coming, he said, "I'll call you when I'm back in New York," and hung up on the head of Sorensen to go and take his wife in his arms, to kiss her and love her.

And she said she wanted a divorce.

Dominic stared at her, disbelieving, her words cutting like a knife in his heart. He, who had thought he was immune to such pain, who had taken care never to fall in love, knew he was wrong.

He loved Sierra more than he'd ever loved anyone. The pain he'd felt when Carin had jilted him was nothing compared to this. That had been embarrassment, injured pride, the humiliation of masculine ego.

This cut him clear to his soul.

"Why?" His voice was hoarse, desperate, frantic. He clutched her so hard that his fingers might be leaving bruises on her arms. He tried to loosen his grip, tried not to hurt her.

God knew she was hurting him!

"Because," Sierra said, her voice choked, as if she'd been crying.

"Because there are things you don't know."

"What things?" He was baffled, shaking his head. "What are you talking about? Why are you crying?"

She wiped a hand across her eyes hastily. "I'm *not* crying! The sun was in my eyes!"

"What things?" he persisted.

"Things you haven't settled. Things that will make a difference." She struggled out of his grasp and moved quickly away, not looking at him.

He stared at her. "You always used to make sense."

She gave a quick desperate shake of her head. "Go into the village. There's a little house on Harbor Street. A shop where they sell paintings. It's blue with white shutters."

“Do you have sunstroke?” He tried to feel her forehead, but she pushed him away.

“Damn it, no! I don’t have anything! Just go!” When he didn’t move, she glared at him. “Do it, damn you! Go!”

Stubbornly he shook his head. “You come, too.”

“No! I can’t! I’ve got to—” She broke off and started into the house.

And he knew exactly what she was intending to do, and took three strides across the deck and grabbed her arm. “I’ll go,” he said fiercely. “But you’ll stay. You have to promise me. You can’t leave. Don’t you dare leave until I get back!”

She glowered at him, but he wouldn’t let her go until she promised.

“I’ll be here,” she said finally. “Just go.” Her throat sounded tight, her tone agonized.

He went.

But not without a long and desperate look back.

She waited.

It was the hardest thing she’d ever done.

Harder than standing up to Terry Graff at the pool when she was seven. Harder than moving to New York when she was twenty. Harder than staying out of Dominic’s arms when she’d so desperately wanted to be in them those weeks after she had learned he didn’t want out of their marriage what she wanted.

She waited, and paced, and bit her nails and fretted. She didn’t want to be there when he came back, didn’t want to have to put on a brave face while he gravely agreed that she was right, they needed to get a divorce.

Even more she didn’t want to be here if he came back and said they didn’t. She didn’t want to be the reason he was torn.

She prowled and fumed and agonized. And finally, because she could stand waiting alone no longer, she grabbed his cell phone and called Pammie. It would help to know what the outside world was doing. It would be good to know how Frankie was getting along.

So she rang Pammie on the cell phone she had now—the one she had to carry everywhere so that the transplant people could always get in touch with her.

Even so she was surprised when Pammie answered so quick and breathlessly.

“It’s Sierra,” she said.

And Pam said, “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“They found Dan.” Frankie’s father, she meant. The man she hadn’t seen in all those years. “He took the test. He’s a match. He’s here. We’re at the hospital. They’re doing the surgery within the hour!”

Abruptly Sierra sat down. And a good thing, too, or her legs would not have held her. “They found Dan?” she echoed. Were missing fathers turning up everywhere these days?

“Long story,” Pammie said. “I can’t believe it. But it’s true. He came back the minute he heard. He’s changed, Sierra. He’s grown up.” She sounded as wobbly as Sierra felt. “I’m not hoping for fairy-tale endings, you know—Dan, me and Frankie together forever—but at least Frankie knows his dad cares. And that’s something, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Sierra said. She felt faint and just a little bit hollow. “That’s...wonderful.” Her throat was tight. She thought she might start to cry.

“How did you know?” Pam asked again. “Did Dominic find out? He would. He’s so good at everything.”

“He didn’t find out,” Sierra said. “He’s had...other things on his mind.”

“Is everything okay?” Pammie demanded. “Are you having a good time? A good honeymoon?”

“Yes,” Sierra said. “Oh, yes.”

She was sure, under the circumstances, God would forgive her the lie.

“Give Frankie my love,” she said a little desperately. “Tell him...tell him I’ll see him soon.”

“I’ll tell him,” Pammie promised. Then, “Love you, Sierra. And thank you. Without you this couldn’t have happened. You and Dominic.”

So something good had come out of it.

Frankie was getting a transplant. He was getting a father, maybe. At least that’s what it sounded like. And Lacey was getting a father, too. And Dominic would, perhaps, get Carin back.

All because of Sierra.

It was just dandy being so useful.

But if it was, why did she feel lower than dirt?

She stood on the deck, clutching the railing and tried to swallow her misery, tried to be happy for everyone else—and then she heard the sound of footsteps, Dominic’s footsteps coming up the path.

He was grinning. Laughing. Actually *laughing* when he spotted her!

Sierra shut her eyes. Damn him! *Lucky* him! she thought miserably. And as much as she knew she should feel glad for him, she couldn’t show it.

Personal magnanimity had its limits. Sierra had met hers.

He came up the steps two at a time. “Sierra!” His tone was urgent.

“Sierra?” Now it was questioning because she wouldn’t turn around.

She felt his hand on her arm and had to force herself not to pull away. She held still, didn’t move.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice soft and serious and just a little choked up.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered, still looking away.

Silence descended. He still held her and she cried inside, *Let me go! Please just let me go!*

Then he said, his tone a little strained, “But I don’t understand why you want the divorce?”

She whirled on him. “You don’t understand? How could you *not* understand? That’s Carin! *Your* Carin! The woman you loved—maybe still do! And there’s Lacey! Lacey is...Lacey is...”

“My brother’s child.”

“*What!*”

He nodded and repeated what he’d just told her. “She’s Nathan’s child.”

Once more Sierra sat down. Only this time it felt more like she fell. She stared up at him, shaking her head, disbelieving, astonished. “I don’t understand.”

“I do,” Dominic said softly. “Now.”

He sat down on the deck beside her, pulled her close, wrapped one arm around her and took one of her hands in his, as if he needed to hang on. Sierra thought she knew how he felt.

“Tell me,” she urged.

“It finally makes sense. I don’t know why I didn’t see it years ago. You know how I told you our fathers got us together? Well, mine proposed, but hers apparently did a bit more than that. He said he’d found her the man she

was going to marry. And she, dutiful daughter that she was—besides being young and inexperienced—agreed.”

“She didn’t...love you?” Sierra had to ask.

“She liked me. I liked her. I guess I thought I loved her. I didn’t know what love was then.” He gave her hand a squeeze. “And neither did she. Until she came down here to spend those three weeks. Nathan was already here. He’d been doing a shoot in Venezuela and he came up early to spend some time. He didn’t know she was coming. Didn’t know her! But what happened to them was, well—” he slanted her a glance “—a lot like what happened to you and me.”

“Hormones?”

“Instant attraction. And instant resistance. She, after all, was supposed to be going to marry me. She said Nathan tried to stay away, but then the night before Dad and Rhys were going to arrive there was a storm and they ended up in very close confines and one thing led to another and it got...”

“Sort of like in Kansas,” Sierra said softly.

“Sort of,” Dominic agreed. “And as soon as the storm was over, Nathan left. He’d done the unthinkable—made love to my fiancée. And so he cut out, called Rhys, told him to take over. He had no idea what Carin was going to do. I don’t think Carin even knew until after he was gone. She loved him. She liked me. There was never any contest.” He sounded wondering and not at all hurt now. He actually seemed relieved.

Sierra touched his cheek. “Why didn’t she just tell you? Why did she run?”

“Because there was no time. Because she was young and scared and her father was expecting her to marry me in the morning. Everyone was expecting her to marry me in the morning. And she knew if she said she wasn’t going to, it wouldn’t wash, Daddy would lean on her to do it.”

“She could have told you!”

Dominic shrugged. “I didn’t give her a chance. I brushed her off, told her to get some sleep because she couldn’t expect any on our wedding night.” He shook his head. “God, I was an ass.”

“No!” Sierra shook her head. He’d been hurt. But he didn’t look hurt now. He looked almost happy. “Where’d she go?”

Dominic’s eyes narrowed just a little. “To stay with Estelle and Maurice.”

Sierra’s eyes bugged. “Estelle hid her?”

“Just let her lie low. Dad and Mr. Campbell were checking ferries and seaplanes and boats and every damned thing you could think of, but no one remembered seeing her leave. No wonder. She never went. And—” he grinned a little “—she’s been here ever since. Got herself a nice little shop and a decent career. And none of us ever knew—until now.”

They sat in silence then. The sunset sounds of the ocean and the jungle were the only things to be heard.

Sierra let it all settle in, reshuffled reality, put Nathan with Carin and Lacey and wondered what the future was for that. Then she redealt the hand that fate had played her—and wondered, too, if she dared hope.

“I thought Lacey was yours,” she admitted. “When I met Carin, I just thought...” She couldn’t say the words, because even though they were untrue, they still had the power to hurt.

“I never made love with Carin. I was never *in* love with Carin. I’ve only loved one woman in my life—besides my mother,” Dominic said with a wry smile. He touched her chin with his finger and turned her face so that she had to look at him or shut her eyes. “And that woman is you.”

He loved her.

He actually said he loved her. And she could see his heart and his soul in his eyes, and she knew what he said was true.

It was scary being loved like that. It was scary mattering so much to another person. It was easier to love, she thought, than be loved.

“Have I waited too long?” he asked her. There was a hint of hesitation in his voice, a thread of nervousness.

“Too long?”

“Once you said—” he swallowed “—that you...loved me...” He stopped and looked away and she saw the fear in his eyes and understood.

“I do, Dominic,” she swore. And it was a vow every bit as deep and passionate as the ones she’d made at their wedding. She put her arms around him and felt his wrap around her in an embrace that promised to last a lifetime. “I love you, Dominic. I do, I do.”

She did.

When a man was lucky enough to be married to a woman like Sierra, he could have no doubts. Dominic’s doubts were well and truly assuaged, that was certain.

He came down the sand of another beach—a Long Island beach—to find his wife was playing in the water with Frankie and his parents.

Three months after his surgery, Frankie's future looked bright. And not just because he had a new kidney. He had a father now as well.

"I don't believe in fairy tales," Pammie had insisted when she'd debated marrying Dan last month.

But Sierra had said, "You believe in love, don't you?" And she'd smiled over the top of Pam's head and her eyes had met Dominic's. "Then that's all you need."

That was what they had—the two of them. Love.

More love, Dominic thought, than any man had a right to. He basked in Sierra's love every day of his life, and he never stopped thinking how damned lucky he was.

He understood now how Rhys could have been terrified to love again after Sarah. It put that kind of fear into a man. It took a good woman to persevere, to remove one-by-one all the roadblocks men were so good at constructing. Mariah had done it for Rhys.

Sierra had done it for him.

The months he had been married to Sierra had been the best time of his life. He wouldn't trade Sierra for all the mergers and takeovers and positive balance sheets on earth. She brought joy to every day and pleasure to every night.

She had enriched his life in ways he never thought possible.

He hoped Carin someday might do the same for Nathan. If Nathan could ever get past the guilt.

"You did me a favor," Dominic had told his brother when he and Sierra got back from their honeymoon.

Nathan was just about to leave again and he'd stared, shocked, when Dominic had confronted him with the news that Carin was living on Pelican Cay—and that he now understood why all those years ago, she'd jilted him.

"It's all right," he'd told his brother. "We didn't love each other. We were friends, that's all."

But Nathan wasn't having any of it. "I betrayed you."

"Well, it didn't happen the best way it could have," Dominic conceded. "But that's past. It's over. That doesn't matter now."

Nathan had grunted, resisting just the way Dominic remembered resisting.

“I suppose you could just forget I told you,” he’d said mildly. “Spend your life at the four corners of the earth and miss out on the best part of it.”

Nathan had kept right on packing.

“Carin’s made a good life for herself. She probably doesn’t care if she ever sees you again,” Dominic went on ruthlessly. “Can’t say the same for Lacey.”

Nathan stilled. He gave Dominic a narrow look. “Who’s Lacey?”

Dominic smiled his best enigmatic smile. “That, ol’ buddy, is something I think you might want to find out.”

Nathan had left the next day. He was going to Tahiti, he’d said. After that he had an assignment in Lapland.

“Run as long as you need to,” Dominic had told him when he drove him to the airport. “But don’t run so long you miss the best part of your life.”

Like he almost had.

He still couldn’t be home as much as he wanted to be. He’d had to go to a meeting this morning. It had come up suddenly and it cut into plans he and Sierra had made for taking Frankie and his parents out to spend the weekend at the Long Island house.

“You go on,” he’d told her this morning. “I’ll finish as early as I can, and I’ll come then.”

“You’re sure?” He knew she would happily have forgone the excursion, but he knew she wouldn’t want to disappoint Frankie.

“I’m sure,” he’d said. He’d done his job. Taken care of business. Then he’d headed for the house as quick as he could.

He knew she saw him coming because she waved in his direction just before Frankie soaked her with a huge splash of water. Of course, being Sierra, she gave as good as she got, drenching Frankie until he fell back laughing.

Then he dove under a wave and came up grinning. Then Dan let go of Pammie long enough to say he’d show his son how to body surf.

“Want to come?” Dominic heard Frankie ask Sierra eagerly.

And he was surprised to see his wife shake her head.

“I think I’ll take a little nap,” she said and came up the beach to stand over him and shake water all over his chest.

He squinted up at her. “Lookin’ for trouble, lady?”

She giggled, shook just a bit more water his way, then said, “Move over,” and settled on the beach towel beside him. He was still in his khakis

and his shirt and tie.

She was cold and wet and it was like hugging a wet seal, but Dominic didn't hesitate to put his arms around her.

"Ahhh." Sierra burrowed against him, then she gave a little shudder. "Nice."

"Wet," Dominic said.

She smiled against his collarbone, then tipped her head to look up at him. "You know you don't mind."

He dropped a kiss on her nose. "You're right. I don't."

"How did the merger go?"

"We've merged."

"Fruitful, was it?" She was playing with his tie, loosening it, making him hot where he wasn't wet and cold.

He cleared his throat. "Very fruitful." He tried to sound calm and businesslike.

"That's the way with mergers," Sierra said. Her fingers had unknotted the tie now, and they were sliding it off his neck.

Dominic caught her hands. "Behave."

Sierra gave him an innocent smile. "Me?"

"We're on a public beach," he reminded her, though his body was more in need of the reminder than she was.

"Indeed we are," she agreed. "I have news about another fruitful merger." She was running the tie against the back of his neck.

He went suddenly still as the import of her words hit him. "Sierra?" He felt short of breath, punched in the gut. "Are you...?"

She gave him a heart-melting smile. "It appears that we are going to have a little dividend about six months from now."

He felt the color drain from his face and was glad they were sitting on the sand. He felt dizzy and delighted and scared to death.

"Try whistling," Sierra said, reading him perfectly. "It helps."

"Does it?" Dominic managed when he could form words.

"Oh, yes." She put her arms around him and nestled against him and he wrapped her in his arms and held her against his overflowing heart. "It will be fine. You and I together can handle anything, can't we?" She slanted a glance of pure love up at him.

And Dominic nodded, loving her with all his heart. "You bet."

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